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THE SPECIALIST GAMES AND GAMING MAGAZINE
FOR FECS AND ARCADES WORLDWIDE

APRIL 2019 Vol 25 Issue 8



Expanding horizons

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Middle East Special Issue

Part 2

fabyland

OFFICIAL INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION



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EDITORIAL

Added experience

THE fact that we have to split our Middle East special issue into two parts is testament to the strength and diversity of the market there.

Despite many in the region reporting somewhat of a slowdown, you wouldn't know it judging by the amount of interest that is piqued every time an event takes place there.

Like most other markets, it too is not only a hotbed of FECs but of the ever-broadening palette of experiential attractions bidding to bring guests through their doors. VR, ziplines, escape rooms, mini-golf, inflatables and trampoline parks are as hot here as anywhere and this is evident amid the bustling aisles of DEAL.

We conclude the Middle East focus in this April issue with the addition of a comprehensive supplement from Saudi operating giant, Al Hokair. Also making the pages are indoor skydiving, the latest in sports games, the growing plight of the Italian AWP market and a report from the Irish gaming show and its prohibitive legislation. We spoil you...

Dan Snook

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WELCOME

Germany In Diesem Heft

Willkommen bei *InterGame*, der führenden Zeitschrift für die Münzautomaten- und Glücksspielbranche, die jeden Monat in mehr als 150 Ländern erhältlich ist. *InterGame's* Autoren sind unter den erfahrensten in ihrem Feld und bringen jeden Monat fundierte und ausführliche Nachrichten, Sonderbeiträge, Interviews, Messeberichte, Marktanalysen, Meinungen und Bilder aus der Welt der Münzautomaten. Im hinteren Teil der Zeitschrift befindet sich ein großer Abschnitt über neue Produkte, der von Betreibern mit großem Interesse gelesen wird. *InterGame* enthält regelmäßig Sonderbeilagen, die ein bestimmtes Land, eine Weltregion oder einen Industriesektor ausführlich behandeln. Um regelmäßig eine Kopie von *InterGame* zu erhalten, e-mailen Sie michelle@intergame.ltd.uk.

Italy Interno

Benvenuti su *InterGame*, il mensile leader per l'industria dei giochi e dei videogiochi coin-op, distribuita in più di 150 paesi. I nostri autori sono tra i più esperti del campo, e vi offrono ogni mese notizie recenti e approfondite, speciali, interviste, recensioni degli show, analisi di mercato, opinioni e immagini da tutto il mondo coin-op. Nelle ultime pagine troverete una vasta sezione dedicata ai nuovi prodotti, sempre avidamente letta dai veri professionisti. *InterGame* pubblica regolarmente supplementi speciali dedicati a un paese o un settore specifico. Per abbonarvi a *InterGame*, inviate una mail a michelle@intergame.ltd.uk.

France A L'Interieur

Bienvenue dans l'univers d'*InterGame*, le magazine leader des jeux à prépaiement et de l'industrie du divertissement, et dont chaque numéro mensuel est distribué dans plus de 150 pays. Les journalistes d'*InterGame* sont les plus expérimentés de la branche et vous offrent chaque mois des informations et des reportages approfondis ainsi que des interviews, des rapports sur les salons et sur la situation du marché, des avis et des images, le tout provenant de sources bien renseignées. Dans les dernières pages du magazine, une importante partie, que les opérateurs dévorent littéralement, est consacrée aux nouveaux produits. *InterGame* inclut régulièrement des suppléments spéciaux dédiés à un pays ou une région spécifique ou encore à un secteur industriel que le magazine ausculte soigneusement. Pour recevoir votre numéro attiré d'*InterGame*, envoyez un email à michelle@intergame.ltd.uk.

Spain Dentro

Bienvenidos a *InterGame*, la publicación líder para los juegos de máquinas tragaperras y la industria de los juegos que se distribuye en más de 150 países con una periodicidad mensual. Los articulistas de *InterGame* son los que poseen el mayor bagaje del sector y cada mes nos deleitan con noticias contrastadas y en profundidad, artículos, entrevistas, informes, informes de mercado, opiniones e imágenes pertenecientes a la industria de las máquinas tragaperras. Al final de la revista, encontrarán una amplia sección que abarca nuevos productos, sección que será presa de una ávida lectura por parte de los operadores. *InterGame* suele incluir suplementos especiales que se centran en un país concreto, región del mundo o sector de la industria en profundidad. Para recibir una copia de *InterGame*, envíe un mensaje de correo electrónico a michelle@intergame.ltd.uk.

China 里面

欢迎光临 *InterGame*, 这是投币娱乐及游戏业的领先杂志, 每个月发送到 150 多个国家。

InterGame 的记者为各自领域的资深人士, 每月向您提供资讯、详细报道及访谈、展览报道、市场报道、观点和图片, 其内容均源自灵通渠道。杂志最后有一个广受读者青睐的栏目, 专门介绍新产品。

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Russia Загляни внутрь

Мы рады приветствовать Вас на страницах *InterGame*, ведущего журнала для индустрии монетных игровых автоматов и азартных игр, распространяемого ежемесячно в более, чем 150 странах мира.

Журналисты *InterGame* обладают самым богатым опытом в этой сфере и ежемесячно предоставляют информацию и всесторонние обзоры, а также интервью, отзывы о выставках, отчеты о состоянии рынка, мнения и иллюстрации из хорошо осведомленных источников. В последней части журнала представлен популярный раздел, посвященный новой продукции.

InterGame регулярно публикует специальные отчеты по странам или каким-либо вопросам, касающимся географического региона или сектора индустрии, которые журнал тщательно изучает.

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BREAKING NEWS

InterCard boost for Bounce About

BOUNCE About Laser Tag, an FEC in Toms River, New Jersey, US, has reported a sharp increase in revenue after adopting InterCard's cashless technology.

Owner Danielle Mirabal said that with the ability to accept credit cards as well as cash for gameplay, she quickly saw a jump in arcade revenue. "I want to say at least a 40 per cent increase because I was only able to do cash before," she said, "and we would lose business."

After two years of running her 26 arcade games on quarters, Mirabal said she knew her operation had to become more efficient. "We didn't have a change machine and we were making change at the front desk. I had a million quarter jams and I was always fixing coin mechanisms. The switch to cashless technology eliminated those problems."

Using InterCard's cashless technology also helped Mirabal improve her marketing and promotions, from being able to offer special pricing for specific times to donating branded game cards to local school fundraisers.



Danielle Mirabal, owner of Bounce About Laser Tag, with her iTeller kiosk from InterCard

Bulldog aims for rapid ROI

REDEMPTION manufacturer Bulldog Games has started 2019 with a flourish underpinned by a commitment to maximise cashbox and deliver the fastest possible ROI on its games.

Launched at the EAG 2018 show in London, the company is reporting an outstanding start to this year with orders up by 20 per cent on the same stage 12 months ago, having also secured its first international distribution agreement covering the Middle East.

Tony Glanville, managing director of exclusive UK distributor RLMS Sales, believes the popularity of Bulldog is due to its ability to deliver on a number of fronts. He said: "To rise to the top, redemption equipment needs to tick certain boxes. In particular games need to be simple to play, create a sense of theatre for the player and, most significantly, enhance the level of interaction. The ability to do this and to do this consistently, is contributing to outstanding cash box figures that are 15 per cent above games of a similar footprint and a rapid ROI, which can be as short as 15 weeks."

At EAG this year, Bulldog displayed Ben Bones and a new Pac-Man pusher. "Ben Bones is a pirate themed vid-emption game with a barrel controller that provides the player interaction that's such an important part of the experience," Glanville said. "This allows players to interact with the game by spinning the unique eye-catching barrel to try and win the pirate booty."

Bulldog has received significant orders for the Pac-Man pusher, which is available in four and eight player formats, as well as a deluxe version, which has an option to add a dot matrix top box and backlit front doors, enhancing the game's visual appeal and Pac-Man branding.

"Combining the stand out appeal of Pac-Man with the superb quality build that Bulldog is recognised for, is a winning formula," said Glanville. "Pac-Man remains one of the most popular arcade games of all time and nearly 40-years after it was launched it is still recognised and loved throughout the world."



BN backs debut IFX

BANDAI NAMCO Amusement Europe was the first company to book a stand at the upcoming InterFun Expo, which will take place at the New Dock Hall, Royal Armouries, in Leeds on April 30-May 1, and it is the biggest!



The debut show for FECs, adventure zones, play centres, arcades and other amusement attractions, is organised by InterGame's sister company, InterGame Events.

From large holiday park and bowling alley operators through to small independent sites, BNAE is a trusted name and supplies the biggest brands in the industry, including its own Pac-Man, DC Comics, Rabbids, Shaun the Sheep, Harry Potter and more. Visitors to the BNAE stand will see games from some of the world's leading suppliers, including Adrenaline Amusements, Apple Industries, Triotech, AiSolve, Andamiro, Raw Thrills and The Really Big Crane Company.

"We are really excited to be part of the very first InterFun Expo," said commercial and sales director James Anderson. "BANDAI NAMCO is one of the biggest suppliers of entertainment machines and services to the leisure industry in the world. We are hoping to meet buyers from all kinds of attractions and retail environments who are keen to discover how profitable play can be to their businesses."

"BANDAI NAMCO clearly saw the benefits of a show dedicated to the play sector and we are extremely pleased that they have supported us with such a big stand," said InterGame managing director Christine Butterworth. "The InterFun Expo is filling up rapidly and we look forward to welcoming everyone to the Royal Armouries in Leeds at the end of April."

To find out more about the InterFun Expo or book a stand, visit www.interfunexpo.com.

Carlton promoted at LAI

TABOR Carlton is the new marketing director at LAI Games, replacing Mark Easte, who has taken over as managing director.

In this role, Carlton will develop the company's marketing strategy, maximise the department's ROI and continue to build brand awareness.

He was previously brand marketing manager for the overall group, Helix Leisure, looking after branding and graphic design for Embed, The Locker Network and LAI Games. He has connections with Embed as a contractor, going back to 2007.

"Having worked across multiple Helix Leisure companies for the past decade, Tabor has a very good understanding of the industry and he also brings a fresh perspective to what we're doing at LAI," said Mark Easte. "Having him in a more public-facing role with our customers and distribution partners, I look forward to seeing what he can do for the company."



D and B's opens at Janss

A NEW Dave and Buster's has opened at the Janss Marketplace shopping mall in California, US.

The restaurant and entertainment location features 32,000sq.ft of arcade games, sports viewing and food and drink. It is the 15th Dave and Buster's to open in California and the 123rd overall.

Guests can enjoy more than 150 of the latest arcade games, a chef-crafted menu and a sports bar. Among the available games are the new multiplayer virtual reality attraction platform featuring Dragonfrost and Jurassic World VR Expedition.



Image courtesy of Dave and Buster's

Dubai Entertainment Amusement and Leisure 2019

The stats behind the 25th DEAL show in Dubai

25

The birthday DEAL celebrates in 2019. Also the start date in March



4

The number of halls the show will occupy in the Dubai World Trade Centre

40

The number of countries represented among show visitors; 55 per cent from the Middle East, 15 per cent from Asia Pacific, nine per cent from Africa and seven per cent from the US

56

The amount of billions of US\$ visitors are expected to spend in the UAE travel and tourism sector by 2020. DEAL will help to capitalise on this

300

More than 300 companies and brands represented on booths during the event

93

Per cent of exhibitors that felt that their objective of generating sales leads was met in 2018

59

The percentage of visitors from top-level management, with 33 per cent influencers

39

The percentage of exhibitors from Europe, 30 from Asia Pacific, 16 ME and 15 US

28

Categories of exhibitors from amusement machines to vending and gift supplies

28

The average degree of temperature in Celsius in Dubai in March

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Hologate working on Holo Slam

HOLOGATE'S next in-house title for its VR platform is Holo Slam.

Currently under development and as yet without an official release date, it is expected to roll out at some point in the second quarter. Still in the prototype stage, the German manufacturer told *InterGame* that it is a futuristic, four-player sports title drawing on aspects of tennis combined with the old-school arcade classic Breakout. Players have to throw and catch an energised disc. Aiming at targets on specific tiles they will have to play strategically to get the upper hand on opponents.

The nature of Holo Slam, like other games designed by Hologate, lends itself perfectly to being played competitively between locations, online, which of course opens up all manner of esports possibilities.

Nerf Arcade on test in US

THE latest brand to make its way into US arcades and FECs is Nerf.

The popular foam dart toys are an ideal fit for the basis of a vid-emption game and it looks like Raw Thrills agrees.

The game has been spotted on test in Round1 and Dave and Buster's venues in California, reports Arcade Heroes.

Nerf Arcade uses the same control panel and seating arrangement as Space Invaders Frenzy, but has replaced the giant LED screen in favour of a standard display.

Raw Thrills isn't commenting on the title at the moment but internet comments suggest it sounds like it is a vid-emption game with shooting gallery-style play.



Image courtesy of Arcade Heroes

Action Tag shoots to thrill at IFX

LASER tag specialist Action Tag is to exhibit at the InterFun Expo, taking place from April 30-May 1, in Leeds, UK, following the completion of a major installation in the Middle East.

"Action Tag is delighted to be taking part in the InterFun Expo, after having completed the largest indoor arena in the Middle East, located in the Abdali Mall in Amman, Jordan," said Ron Francis, the company's founder and CEO.

He said such new developments highlight the need for an entertainment complex in modern-day shopping malls.

"It is needed to combat the influence of the online shopping and to draw people back into the real world, where they can look and touch the products," he added. "Having an entertainment centre increases the footfall of the malls and Action Tag are proud to be at the forefront of this new concept."

Christine Butterworth, managing director of InterFun Expo, said: "Laser tag is a firm favourite when it comes to family entertainment. It is no surprise shopping malls around the globe are looking to this exhilarating activity as a way to encourage more families through the door."

InterFun Expo is a B2B event aimed at those involved in providing family entertainment and activities within retail and standalone environments. It is free to attend for shopping centre owners, developers and FEC managers by registering at www.interfunexpo.com/register.

Triotech promotes Larose

SYLVAIN Larose has been appointed chief operating officer at Triotech.

A key player at the Canadian manufacturer of interactive entertainment for the last 15 years, Larose will now supervise all of the company's operations, in Montreal and around the world.

"Sylvain has the skills and, especially, an in-depth knowledge of the market and so will play a key role in defining our future orientations and business strategies," said Ernest Yale, founding president. "Renowned for his dynamic approach and his thoroughness, he will help the company reach its business goals and make sure that our products continue to stand out in amusement parks and tourist attractions around the world."

"I am very proud to put the expertise I have gained since 2004 to work on behalf of the company and to tackle this new challenge," said Sylvain Larose. "I had the good fortune of seeing Triotech grow on the world stage and am convinced that we can go even further in the next few years."



Walmart VR tour under way

A TOURING VR attraction has been making its way around a network of Walmart stores in the US.

The attraction is based on DreamWorks' *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World* movie and has been created by VR developer SpatialX. It features a 10-minute VR show that includes a five-minute simulation, interacting with animated characters and dragons during a high-speed ride through a cave utilising motion seats.

The tour is making its way through 40 different stores in seven cities and will culminate at the supermarket giant's Bentonville, Arkansas, headquarters in April, although it may get longer if it is well received.



Wonderville seeking investment

A KICKSTARTER fund is to launch for a US bar and event space dedicated to indie video games in Brooklyn, New York, US.

The funding is being requested by Mark Kleback, the founder of the non-profit Death By Audio Arcade, the amusement game cabinet maker. He is asking for US\$70,000 in funding from the community and, in return, is offering exclusive games, art and handmade arcade cabinets.

The site is to be called Wonderville and will be a "a new celebration of independent games and interactive art."

Wonderville will operate new, original experiences created by indie developers and artists, which up until now have only been exhibited at festivals or short-term pop-ups. The bar will house these titles permanently and will also host tournaments, play test nights, board games, comedy, live music, and rotating art installations.

Smy joins Scruffy Dog

SCRUFFY Dog Global Creative Services, the turnkey experience and theming company, has appointed Gareth Smy as a creative lead based in its London, UK, studio.

His main role will be to lead the company's global attractions, one of the first being for DreamWorks.

Prior to joining Scruffy Dog, Smy worked at the Lego Group in Billund, Denmark, focusing on the creative and IP management for Legoland parks worldwide, and also at Merlin Magic Making, the creative design division of Merlin Entertainments.



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Nayax supports IFX

NAYAX is to showcase its cashless payments solutions and management suites to arcade and FEC operators attending the InterFun Expo in Leeds, UK.

"As Nayax expands into the amusement, arcade and kiddie ride markets, we are excited to participate in this year's InterFun Expo, bringing our cashless payment solution to arcade and FEC operators," said Lewis Zimble, general manager of Nayax UK.

"Our complete system lets consumers pay with their preferred method of cashless payment, while offering a wide range of management tools and consumer engagement opportunities to operators, allowing increased revenue and productivity."

The company will also host a seminar covering trends in payments during the event.

Christine Butterworth, managing director of InterFun Expo, said: "It's great to have a company like Nayax present at InterFun Expo to show operators how they can benefit from new payments technology and to give an overview of payment trends affecting the sector."

IFX is free to attend by registering at www.interfunexpo.com/register.



500 set up in Saudi Arabia

IN the past year an estimated 500 companies from the wider leisure and entertainment market have set up in Saudi Arabia, in response to the country's Vision 2030 programme.

The number comes from Saudi's General Investment Authority's deputy governor for marketing and communication, Khaled Tash.

He said that there are many more companies in the sector still to come. Tourism and entertainment can be lucrative, he said, proven by the eight-week Winter Festival held in the Al Ula region where there are the famous Nabatean tombs carved into rock. "We have had an amazing demand for people to go there."

ParadropVR funding boost

UK VR attraction developer Frontgrid has secured a £100,000 investment into its ParadropVR experience.

Bathgate Business Finance secured the £100,000 loan against security from the Reward Finance Group and the cash injection is allowing Frontgrid to expand its manufacturing and marketing ambitions for the concept.

The 2017 start-up has already completed successful UK installations in Merlin Entertainment's new indoor adventure centre at the Birmingham NEC, the Bear Grylls Adventure and iFly in Basingstoke. Further afield, it has secured deals that will see the paragliding experience go to the Middle East and Asia.

Matt Wells, CEO at Frontgrid, said: "There is a huge global shift towards the experience economy and active leisure. People are looking for unique, social and memorable experiences beyond just staring at a screen."

"However, more than 50 per cent of the world's population now live in cities and don't have easy access to the adventurous, adrenaline fuelled experiences that David (executive chairman and co-founder, David Wood) and I are so passionate about. ParadropVR brings that opportunity directly to those people."



William Hill posts large loss

WILLIAM Hill posted a statutory loss before tax of £721.9m in 2018, following the previous year's profit of £146.5m.

The impending reduction in maximum stakes on fixed-odds betting terminals to £2 in the UK led to a previously reported £882.8m cash impairment to the retail division, with overall exceptional charges and adjustments totalling £922.1m. This in turn led to a statutory loss of 83.6p per share.

Overall, William Hill's net revenue was up by two per cent to £1.621bn during 2018, with adjusted operating profits from existing operations down by three per cent to £266.8m, in line with expectations.

The full-year dividend of 12p per share was down nine per cent on 2017's 13.2p.

The group made significant progress in the US, with existing businesses delivering 42 per cent net revenue and boasting a 34 per cent market share in the seven regulated states.

Online activities in the UK and internationally were up by 25 per cent, with underlying net revenue up six per cent and operating profit rising 11 per cent prior to the impact of improved customer due diligence measures, which saw account closures costing around £17m.

The company also said that it was "resilient" in retail prior to the FORTs stake cut, with net revenue down by two per cent despite tough trading conditions on the UK high street.

"2018 was a busy and decisive year for us," said Philip Bowcock, CEO of William Hill. "Key regulatory decisions in the UK and US gave us much needed clarity to set a new five-year strategy and a goal to double profits by 2023. We have three businesses at different stages, with online growing in the UK and diversifying internationally, retail being remodelled in response to the new £2 stake limit, and rapid expansion in the US sports betting market. Underpinning this, we have taken a clear leadership stance around safer gambling with our Nobody Harmed ambition."

"Against this backdrop, we delivered a good underlying performance in online, strong growth in the US existing business and a resilient retail outturn in the face of difficult high street conditions."

"We know the next few years will require careful navigating and investment, but with a clear strategy and diverse, experienced leadership teams in place we are ready to capitalise on the opportunities available to us."



InterCard appoints Sherrillo

INTERCARD has expanded its customer service team with the addition of Isabelle Sherrillo.

She will provide concierge service, overseeing customer service requests to ensure that they are handled timely and to customers' satisfaction, as well as help customers prepare for their InterCard installations and follow up afterwards.

A native of Fortaleza in north-eastern Brazil, Sherrillo speaks English, Portuguese and Spanish. She moved to St Louis, US, to earn a master's degree in information technology management at Webster University. She received her undergraduate degree in business administration and an MBA in marketing from the Universidade de Fortaleza.

"Isabelle Sherrillo has helped several leading companies to successfully manage customer relationships and deliver great customer service," said Scott Sherrod, CEO of InterCard. "As InterCard grows its business around the world, Isabelle will work one-on-one with existing and new customers to enhance our industry-leading customer service."



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Busy start for Locker Network

HELIX Leisure's The Locker Network, manufacturer of electronic locker systems for leisure venues, has started 2019 with three major installations at waterparks.

The company's keyless electronic locker system has gone into Three Bears Resort in Warrens, Wisconsin, US, Grand Harbor Resort and Water Park in Dubuque, Iowa and The Waters of Minocqua in Minocqua, Wisconsin, all three properties owned by S and L Hospitality.

The lockers were installed free of charge on a revenue share plan with The Locker Network taking care of daily operation and management. In all, 168 lockers were installed.

Pictured are (left to right) Stephen L Geisz, Grand Harbor general manager, Roy Loudermilk, The Locker Network operations manager and Jason Wiegard, Grand Harbor Water Park manager.

Formula K supplies Heritage

A DELIVERY of eight Jeep-style mini-cars has been handed over to Heritage Attractions UK by manufacturer Formula K.

Following on from the success of its new children's racetrack installed in 2018, which uses a fleet of Formula K's Toro mini-cars at the Sandham Gardens sites on the Isle of Wight, Heritage will use the new cars at its new attraction located at its other key site on the island, at the Needles landmark.



The UK manufactured vehicles was selected at this site due to their tough, outdoor styling enabling the overall attraction to blend with the rugged environment found at the famous beauty spot.

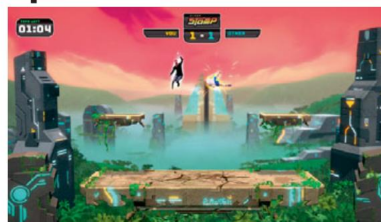
The electrically powered cars will enable five-12 year olds to ride in safety around a track with the option of an assisting adult to help younger or less able drivers also enjoy the experience. The cars are fitted with an onboard computer that is fully programmable and allows customisation to every aspect of the operation. The system also houses an operator remote start/stop control system, which enables the ride assistants to maintain overall control over the safety of the attraction.

The cars at the Needles attraction were finished with Dino Safari-themed graphic, which were designed in-house at Formula K and enhanced with the site's own artwork and branding.

AR trampoline experience

FINNISH manufacturer Valo Motion has developed what it describes as "the world's first two-player augmented reality trampoline experience."

Super Stomp challenges players to stomp their AR opponents by mapping their movements on two adjacent trampolines and recreating them on two large screens facing them.



Designed for all ages and not requiring any wearables, the safety aspect is addressed by utilising two separate, enclosed ValoJump trampolines.

Once a game is over, players can receive a video of their experience to their mobile devices and share them online.



Topgolf Myrtle beach open

TOPGOLF has opened the doors to its first South Carolina, US, location at Myrtle Beach.

The new three-level, 55,000sq.ft venue is the company's 53rd location worldwide.

"We are thrilled to finally open the doors to South Carolina's first Topgolf venue," said the company's Myrtle Beach director of operations, Jeff Kowalski. "Topgolf is everyone's game and we are looking forward to serving the best possible experience for our guests."

Guests can enjoy point-scoring golf games using microchipped balls that instantly score themselves, showing players the accuracy and distance of their shots on a TV screen in their hitting bay. Topgolf venues feature a restaurants, bars big-screen TVs, flexible private event spaces and music in climate-controlled hitting bays.



Cashino Watford's grand opening

Cashino invests £3.5m in AGCs

ADULT gaming company Cashino has invested close to £3.5m in the refurbishment of UK venues in Birmingham, Cotteridge, Coventry, Ealing, Merry Hill, Southampton, Wembley and Watford.

The company, which operates 168 adult gaming centres across the UK, has enjoyed significant success in recent years, and is aiming to build on this by focusing on the development of the customer experience. The intention being to reposition itself as the number one low stake gambling destination, complete with a modern casino feel.

Mark Schertle, chief operating officer for parent company Praesepe, said; "One of the main attractions of Cashino has always been the social side of gaming it provides to our customers, and the key aim of the refurbishment programme is to enhance this social aspect and improve the overall customer experience, which in turn helps create the modern casino feel we are striving for.

"With that aim in mind, we've added serviced bar areas - serving soft drinks, bean to cup coffee machines and a host of hot and cold snacks - to all refurbished venues. We've also added brand new screens, the latest gaming machines and have significantly improved the décor of each of the venues."

In addition to the refurbishment programme, Cashino has also invested a further £3.5m in new gaming machines and service training for its venue and area managers.

KMS heralds Fun4Four

KMS Handels, the sole Germany agent for TAB Austria's Fun4Four, has reported burgeoning sales figures of the unit.

The Fun4Four is a multiplayer game table made especially for the out-of-home entertainment market and Germany is one of its main markets.

Nordhorn-based KMS took over the sole distribution of the product in 2014 due to the steadily growing demand.

The main concept of the table is for players to come together, talk, eat, drink and play games. Up to six people can choose from a variety of more than 75 games including card, dice and action games for children and adults. An internet browser is included and more games are added annually.

With TAB's Music&Fun app for iOS and Android devices, it is now possible to connect mobile phones to the table and, via an internet connection, players can participate in worldwide tournaments. Operators are also able to remotely control the tables or monitor cashboxes.

"We sold nearly 1,000 units in 2018 and this year is looking even more promising," said Herold Scheper, CEO and managing director of KMS. "The Fun4Four table is a huge success currently throughout Germany. People love the concept and in times like these with smartphones everywhere, it provides something unique that they can't get anywhere else."



Boost for Cineplex fortunes

CANADIAN cinema, FEC and VR operator Cineplex has announced some of its best-ever financial results.

Total revenue increased 3.8 per cent to CA\$1.6bn and adjusted EBITDA increased 8.7 per cent to \$256.4m.

"As our diversification initiatives continue to build scale and show more meaningful returns, we continue to focus on managing our costs," said Ellis Jacob, president and CEO.

On a full year basis, box office revenue increased 1.2 per cent to \$724.2m and theatre food service revenue increased 4.4 per cent to an all-time record of \$440.7m. Box office per patron of \$10.46 and concession per patron of \$6.36 also represented annual records for Cineplex. Amusement revenue increased 11 per cent to \$205.8m, primarily due to added revenue contributions from The Rec Room.

"Amusement revenue increased 8.5 per cent to \$53.5m, largely as a result of greater contributions from The Rec Room," Jacob said. "Total revenue from The Rec Room amounted to \$17.9m and achieved a store level margin of 22 per cent."

"We accomplished a great deal in 2018, including the opening of three new theatres and the fifth location of The Rec Room in London, Ontario. We announced an agreement with 4DX to bring the experience to an additional 13 locations across Canada and expanded our virtual reality footprint in Canada with an exclusive agreement with The Void and a significant investment in VRstudios."

"Coming off a record year in 2018, we are encouraged by the outlook of the 2019 film slate and confident in our strategic direction as we continue to build scale in our other businesses."

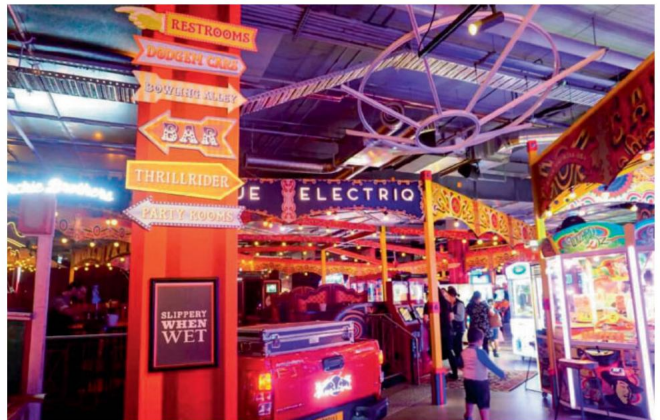


VR for Tilt

TILT Pinball, an arcade in Louisville, US, has added an extensive virtual reality section.

Having moved two years ago from its location on Front Street, Tilt now features a full bar and access to the two restaurants with which it shares the space, Verde and Shoppey's Pizza.

While the basement feels like a traditional arcade filled with neon lights, the upstairs loft where the virtual reality booths are located looks like a modern event space with hardwood floors and areas to quietly hang out.



Shake-up for Funlab?

THE majority shareholder in Australia based operator Funlab is considering its exit options, reports the Australian Financial Review.

Mid-tier private equity firm Next Capital took a controlling 70 per cent interest in Funlab in 2016 with a AU\$60m deal. It has since tapped investment bank Citi for possible involvement with the provider of Strike Bowling and Sky Zone trampoline parks.

Since Funlab CEO Michael Schreiber started the company in 2001, other concepts have been introduced such as FEC Archie Brothers Cirque Electriq and B Lucky and Sons. Holey Moley, the mini-golf brand now has 10 sites across Australia.

Global expansion is next for Funlab on the back of a successful last two and a half years, which have seen sales triple to \$100m and sights firmly set on doubling the current group size.

April will see Funlab open further new brands with Jukes karaoke and Red Herring escape rooms at Crown Melbourne. Holey Moley opened in Auckland, New Zealand, last October, while a flagship Holey Moley opened in Singapore in December 2018.

"We have concepts that stand on the global stage," Schreiber said. "We are working on what an international plan into Asia looks like, using Singapore as a springboard. And we are evaluating the US and the UK, where language is not a barrier to entry."

"In international markets there is more blue sky, but there is still plenty of growth in Australia left."

Schreiber added that with loneliness being a widespread issue for people ingrained in a digital world, consumers were seeking in-person experiences. "There is a shift away from material possessions to experiences," he said. "We are getting a tailwind because of the shift of discretionary spend. There is a counter-balance with our digital lives. It's quite lonely and isolating and we are feeding into that need for high touch experiences."

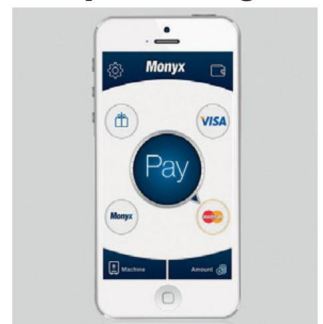
Next Capital said that while an IPO could be an option to back Funlab's future growth plans, it was also keen to talk to trade buyers - and at this early stage there is no preference. The company has also stated that it would consider keeping part of its stake.

Nayax integrates sensory branding

CASHLESS payments and telemetry solutions provider Nayax has become the first to integrate Visa's suite of sensory branding cues globally in the latest version of its mobile payment application.

Monyx Wallet was created by Nayax to enable digital payments at unattended automated machines and facilitate consumer engagement. Users in 21 countries will be among the first to experience Visa's sensory branding suite when they buy a product or reload credit on the app using their Visa card.

The combination of a sound, vibration and animated Visa logo immediately communicates to consumers that their payment, sometimes done in the absence of a traditional payment card, has been successfully authorised and that the transaction is complete.



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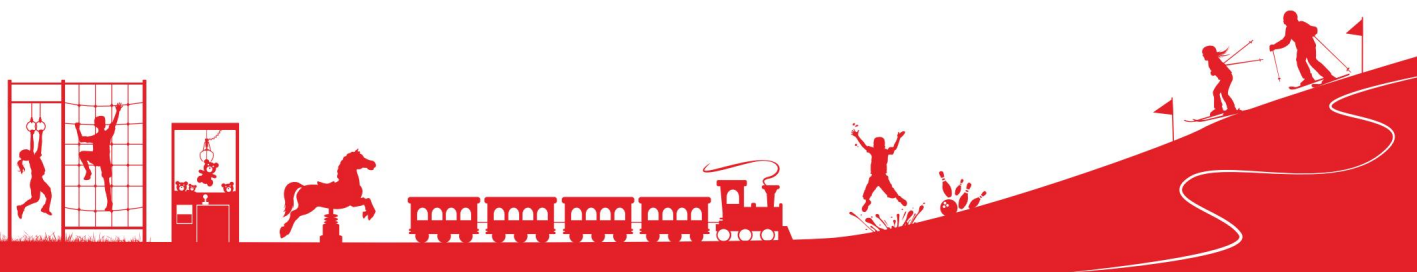
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Aligning online with offline

UK regulator's move on credit card payment online should mean a rethink for offline rules, writes Euromat president **Jason Frost**

THE announcement that the UK Gambling Commission launched a consultation on the use of credit cards in online gambling, with the possibility of banning their use, is welcome news.

It also highlights the persistent disparity between the online and offline worlds and the need to bring the two sectors into alignment.

Indeed, allowing credit card payment in the easily accessible online market, where there are no limitations on stakes and prizes, seems remarkably relaxed compared to the tough restrictions in place on the offline equivalent.

Having restrictions in place for credit cards is clearly the right thing for the player, but I hope that when the UK looks at this issue for online, it

will also reflect on the payment options available to the offline player. Credit cards are clearly a problem (e.g. they are a clear sign that a player cannot immediately afford the bet that they are placing), but this does not mean that cash payment is the only safe option. In fact it's quite the reverse: as consumers increasingly use digital wallets in their day-to-day retail experience, they are migrating to payment technology, which gives the player a much higher level of personal control over spending limits as well as effective self-exclusion options. The predominance of cash is diminishing across Europe, with deeper and faster penetration in western Europe. Bearing that in mind, our industry needs to get ahead of these developments by working with regulators



to come up with viable payment alternatives that will keep our offer relevant to the player and ensure that they are well protected.

Euromat has been invited to address the annual conference of the Gambling Regulators European Forum in May on precisely this subject. We will be using this platform to make the case for solutions that will ensure outcomes that are beneficial for everybody.

In defence of the list

Picking the right attractions for your site can be daunting, so taking a moment to decide upon the best decision-making practices can go a long way, writes **Frank Seninsky**, CEO, Amusement Entertainment Management

I'M a big fan of lists and spreadsheets. There are few problems that can't be solved by putting all the pros and cons for a decision down on a spreadsheet, weighing them all out, ratio balancing them and coming to the most reasonable conclusion.

Let's try this out with wind tunnels, which have been picking up some momentum in the last couple of years and this approach to decision making works as well here as it does with everything else.

The first thing to look at is the cost of each potential attraction and next, the square footage it takes up and required height. Third is throughput - how many people per hour can participate in the attraction? For one-player games, the answer, obviously, is one at a time. Then we get into average time per play and utilisation rates per hour. In all cases, you need to ask yourself, will the annual revenue versus

the cost to purchase and install the attraction or game justify its footprint space and give you a reasonable ROI? It's in the details.

Next, consider how long it takes to outfit a rider or player, brief them and queue them up. It is important not to forget the labour costs, including training, cross training and benefits.

Now, although an attraction may have a low throughput, like a simulator holding two riders, keep in mind one of the most commercially promising aspects of an attraction is spectator appeal - how visible the rider is. You have someone floating metres in the air, the crowd gets excited watching and many then want to give it a go. If the line is too long, they are still very likely to return at a later date to try it out for themselves. Never underestimate visibility.

When you have considered all these elements and have exhausted your list, then take all of this and work out how much revenue would be



generated per square foot, including spectator area. In this instance, while the wind tunnel example is very expensive at the moment, as more are installed and the process and the technology are streamlined, we can expect the purchase cost to go down over the next couple of years. They are still in that experimental phase, but that won't last forever.

It takes seven to 10 years for anything in this industry to gain traction. By that, I mean it takes that much time for it to get to a point where 17-20 per cent of operators have it. And then the penetration rate increases sharply.

Lastly, consider if your choice will take revenue away from your other attractions - a notion we call cannibalisation - or add incremental revenue.

Do your homework first. It does pay long-term dividends when done right but you have to start with making that list and then checking it twice!

INTERNATIONAL ROUND-UP

THE AMERICAS

Injustice Arcade updates shipping

THE second series of collectible cards for Injustice Arcade is now shipping along with a new software update.

Locations that currently lease or own Raw Thrills' DC inspired beat 'em-up Injustice Arcade will receive a software kit with the introduction of the brand new Series Two collectible cards.

Alongside the new software to support Series Two cards, the kit also includes a new translight featuring the cards, a decal with a QR code that links to a second series card checklist and a new roll-up banner featuring a whole new set of DC collectible cards.

The new collectibles will once again have different levels - bronze, silver, gold and platinum. The latter will feature new Team Cards, such as League of Assassins, Teen Titans, Justice League and more.

Once the update is complete, both Series One and Series Two cards can be vended. Injustice Arcade 43ins cabinets with serial numbers 42700 and higher have already been updated with the new software.



Peru

IN a review of its activities in 2018, Merkur Gaming Peru has announced that the year was the most successful the company had ever enjoyed in Peru.

The company has 3,760 machines in Peruvian "slots floors," or 85 per cent of all locations. The biggest success, said the company, is its Avantgarde Powerhouse multigame machine.

The company is run by general manager and director of sales for Latin America, Tomas Mieleles.

US

COLUMBIA, South Carolina, is getting an arcade bar - Transmission Arcade and Bar.

The exact location is being kept under wraps until the lease is finalised, but until then, the owners of the venture are introducing themselves and their games to the community through a series of free pop-up events. When open the location will feature four Skee-Ball lanes, 10-15 pinball machines and 15-20 classic arcade cabinets.

US

FREE Play Arcade has announced plans to build its fourth location near downtown Fort Worth, Texas, while shelving plans to open a pinball arcade in the Oak Cliff neighbourhood of the city.

The new venue will occupy the former building of the Live Oak Music Hall and Lounge that closed in 2017, a 55,000sq.ft space with a 3,000sq.ft patio. The arcade chain plans to put 100 arcade machines and at least 15 pinball machines in the new space. It is expected to open toward the end of the year.

US

PORTLAND, Oregon eatery The Original Dinerant has expanded with the addition of a new bar and arcade on its upper mezzanine level overlooking the streets of downtown.

The appropriately named Dinerarcade features a selection of new and vintage arcade games and pinball machines.



image © Two Bit Circus

US

TWELVE new creations and games developed for guests to test out and share feedback on have been unveiled at Two Bit Circus in Los Angeles, US.

Described as "the world's first micro-amusement park," the event is designed to bring together teams of entertainment and tech enthusiasts who create games and the players they are designed for to share feedback.

"We've hosted Beta Nights for years in our fabrication facility but this is our first time under the big top," said Eric Gradman, CTO and inventor at Two Bit Circus. "We're excited to share all these new experiences and see how guests respond. We're on a quest to showcase the latest immersive entertainment and the experimentation happening in VR/AR right now is super exciting."

Some of the new Beta Night creations include Squirrel Smash, Infinity Racer, NovaSnake, Affected: The Visit and Cvrtrain.

"There is so much great technology available to creators these days; unique ways to play are popping up all over," said Gradman. "The future of fun is bright."

US

ARGENTINE debit card solutions developer Sacoa was a sponsor of the Face 2 Face Entertainment Conference held in Colorado Springs, US, from March 5-7.

The company's CEO for Sacoa USA, Sebastian Mochkovsky, was a key speaker at the conference, taking part in the interactive and commercial debates.

US

A PARTIALLY completed condominium complex in Jacksonville, Florida, is the subject of a proposed transformation into an entertainment destination.

Berkman II on the Northbank of the downtown riverfront area of the city will cost an estimated \$122m to convert.

The Downtown Investment Authority and 500 East Bay are seeking city council approval of a development agreement to provide \$36m in incentives for developers, according to reports in the *Jacksonville Daily Record*.

500 East Bay plans to design, build and renovate the partially built 17-storey Berkman II into a 340-room hotel and add a waterpark, indoor and outdoor family entertainment amenities, parking garage and Northbank Riverwalk improvements along the property's riverfront.

US

URBAN Air, the indoor trampoline and entertainment centre chain, has announced its latest venue for Akron, Ohio.

With over 30,222sq.ft of space, the new branch will include wall-to-wall trampolines, dodgeball courts, obstacle courses and playgrounds with multi-level climbing ropes and twisting tubes.

It will also be home to the Urban Air Adventure Hub featuring exclusive Urban Air attractions such as an intense ropes course and the Urban Air Sky Rider Coaster. Other options will include Drop Zone, an inflatable landing pad perched below a series of trampolines, the Runway Tumble Track, a Slam Dunk Zone, The Urban Warrior Course and a Battle Beam.

MIDDLE EAST

Bahrain

WORK has started on the Eagle Hills Diyar development in Bahrain that will eventually house five interconnected lifestyle urban districts.

It is a joint venture project and forms part of the wider Marassi Galleria. Each of the lifestyle urban districts will have its own theme, High Street, Family Plaza, Waterfront Dining Promenade, Animated Rooftop and Luxury Courtyard.

Marassi Galleria will host some of the biggest international retail brands and many entertainment offerings including a multiscreen cinema, ice rink and aquarium. There will also be two luxury hotels and private homes.



UAE

SCRUFFY Dog Group, the turnkey contractor for amusement parks, resorts and attractions projects, has opened a new office in Dubai.

The company has had a presence in Dubai for over a year, but the new offices and new full-time local team will allow it to establish a closer relationship with local clients.

Operations director Tim Hopcraft said: "This was the natural step to take to ensure our clients receive the attention that their projects deserve. We aim to deliver the region's highest level of creative design with global resources and a local understanding."

The new offices come with a studio and six workstations and meeting rooms, to work in conjunction with the London and Barcelona studios.

The latest coup for the company is Shrek's Adventure in London, where Scruffy Dog teamed up with Merlin Entertainment to design, build and install the world's first Light Fury, a dragon figure addition to the cast.

EUROPE

Germany

GERMAN operators can now switch off their machines remotely, using a device created by manufacturer Bally Wulff, but which can be applied to any maker's machine.



Löwen now offers the management software BWN.pro so that its operators can use their laptop to see whether their Löwen machine is currently online or offline or being recorded. Bally Wulff's new updated remote control function will now deactivate games with one click and games can be changed remotely.

The benefit is that it will avoid expensive visits by technicians, said the company. The software has other functions, displaying cashflow, payout ratios and which machine is being played the most.

Sweden

THE gaming market in Sweden had sales of SEK23.4bn (€2.2bn) in 2018, a 1.5 per cent increase over the previous year.

Licensed operators enjoyed sales of SEK16.7bn (€1.57bn), down by 2.3 per cent, leaving SEK6.7bn (€631m) for the unlicensed operators. Now several of those unlicensed operators in 2018 have been granted licences for this year under the new gaming act that came into force on January 1.

Gaming on the internet accounted for 52 per cent of the total revenue, up 12.2 per cent. Income from land-based games was down by 7.9 per cent.

Major operator Svenska Spel had sales of SEK8.8bn, down 2.2 per cent, however this was led by land-based games down by 9.7 per cent balanced by an increase in internet gaming of 20 per cent.

The Netherlands

TWO-and-a-half years after the Netherlands' Lower House passed a Remote Gaming Bill, the Dutch Senate has finally passed it, so the online market in the country is expected to open late next year or early 2021.

According to Gaming in Holland, the Senate also adopted some restrictions on the operators currently dealing with Dutch players. Operators who in the past deliberately targeted the market in the Netherlands will have a two-year blackout period imposed on their activities. In addition, the Dutch government will consider bringing back IP and DNS blocking when the new bill has been in force for three years. Finally, it will investigate the possibility of a complete ban on online gambling advertising.

There will be a gaming tax of 29 per cent of GGR once the licensed operators – who are permitted to be non-Dutch – have started operating.

MORE NEWS



image © MPD01605_Wikipedia

UK

ATTRACTIONS operator Merlin Entertainments drew a record number of visitors last year.

In its annual report the group said it had 67 million people through the doors of its venues. Pre-tax profits were up five per cent to £285m, while revenues rose four per cent to £1.65bn.

CEO Nick Varney said that the company had experienced renewed momentum across its businesses that reflected the strength of the diversified portfolio and geographic spread.

The group operates the Alton Towers park in the UK, Madame Tussauds and the Legoland parks. It has also opened a Peppa Pig theme park in China and a Bear Grylls adventure centre in the UK. It is building three new Legolands – in New York, US, and in Korea and China.

Pakistan

BIG names from the Middle East will lead the way in major projects in Pakistan, the value of which will be the equivalent of 25 per cent of Pakistan's gross domestic project.

Emaar Properties and Dubai World are heavily involved, accounting for an involvement of around US\$118bn.

Emaar will spend over \$20bn on four projects in Islamabad and Karachi, and Dubai World will devote \$10bn to the construction of a modern waterfront on the Karachi coastline and the development and managements of ports across Pakistan.

Trinidad

MERKUR Gaming is celebrating its first installation in Trinidad and Tobago.

It has its games in the Club Royal Caribbean casino in Trinidad's Port-of-Spain. The location is a well-known upmarket venue with live and electronic roulette, blackjack, poker and other tables. It has sports betting facilities and over 150 slots.

Australia

FUNLAB'S B.Lucky and Sons entertainment venue is opening its latest branch in Wollongong, New South Wales, on April 12, next to the company's mini-golf brand, Holey Moley.

The third of its type along with sites in Brisbane and Melbourne, B.Lucky has a unique 1930s Hong Kong pawnshop theme with staff dressed accordingly. The range of video and redemption games will be available, along with a wide range of contemporary food and drink.

UAE

THE UAE emirate of Ras Al Khaimah attracted over one million tourists in 2018, it has been announced by the Tourism Development Agency, a 10 per cent growth over 2017.

The emirate is aiming for tourism to create 10,000 new jobs by 2021.

The figure for tourists was 1,072,066 from both domestic and international sources and was over the target for the first of the three-year strategies launched in 2016.

The biggest number of tourists came from Germany, followed by Russia, the UK, India and Kazakhstan. The numbers were helped by the establishment in the emirate of the Jebel Jais Flight - the world's longest zipline - which had 25,000 guests in the first 12 months.

Lithuania

LITHUANIA-based Uno Parks, which designs, constructs and manages adventure parks and children's playgrounds, is seeing an increasing number of opportunities arise in the MENA region.

The company cites a combination of high populations, young demographics and an appetite for novel entertainment ideas as the main reasons behind the developments.

"As per IAAPA Global Theme and Amusement Park Outlook, MENA 2018, attendance is projected to more than double over the next five years, buoyed by new parks and continued improvement at existing parks," the company said.

To target the region, the company will be exhibiting at the DEAL and SEA shows this year, in Dubai and Jeddah respectively.

EXPOSURE

exposé

PINBALL - THE SPORT?

STERN Pinball will have another moment in the national spotlight after rubbing elbows with ESPN at the Makers Wanted Bahamas Bowl, the top-level college American football event. Stern's Pro Circuit Championship tournament, held in March at the Bottom Lounge bar in Chicago, is scheduled to be featured in a half-hour show on August 7, on major sports channel ESPN's show, *The Ocho* - the network's one-day fringe sports focus. Stern's marketing director Zach Sharpe was introduced to ESPN officials at the game, which the village sponsored. Both he and a co-worker flew down to the Bahamas ahead of the game, taking with them four pinball machines to host a tournament between players and coaches from Florida International and Toledo.



CANADA

A CORN maze attraction in Manitoba, Canada, is now thought to be the new holder of the world's largest snow maze. The fiendishly named A Maze in Corn is, as the cunning moniker suggests, in autumn, but come winter makes full use of Canada's excess of the cold stuff. Subject to confirmation by the good folk at Guinness, it will have beaten the previous record holder, also in Canada but in Thunder Bay, which came in at 1,696sq.m.

GERMANY

ODES to video games have historically come in all shapes and sizes but perhaps never rainbow coloured - until now. Berlin's Schwules Museum has opened a new exhibition, named Rainbow Arcade, to celebrate the history of LGBTQ culture and stories in video gaming. Co-curator of the event is Dr Adrienne Shaw, professor and author with a specialism in queer studies, sexuality and gender in gamer culture and LGBTQ game history. She is also the founder of the LGBTQ Game Archive. Primarily showcasing indie games, the exhibit runs until May this year.

CHINA

ANGER rooms are all the, ahem, rage in the Chinese capital at the moment, according to reports. Smash offers pent-up customers the opportunity to use a baseball bat to dispatch car radios, telephones, speakers, rice cookers and mannequins in a satisfying, pressure-relieving exercise. CNY158 (\$23) gives guests half an hour in an anger room wearing protective gear while staff play music of their choice in the background. Since the venture opened in September, customers have smashed around 15,000 bottles every month, said 25-year-old Jin Meng, who co-founded Smash with her friends.

GERMANY

A WOMAN has attempted to rob an arcade in the North Rhine-Westphalian town of Hamm wearing a motorcycle helmet and brandishing a hand blender. Police reported that the domestic appliance-wielding assailant failed in her bid to extract cash from staff after they were unsurprisingly not intimidated by the threat of a good stirring. The attacker fled on foot after she decided not to mix it up any further.

US

HUDA Beauty products are huge, apparently. Born from a wildly successful YouTube and Instagrammer, Huda Kattan, the brand is now worth over half a million US dollars. It does however turn your face purple when you're playing black light laser tag! A Missouri woman, Amanda Whitrock, was wearing Huda beauty's Easy Bake Loose Powder and went for a game of laser tag. The resulting social media pictures showed that, under the venue's blacklights, her skin turned intense reddish-purple in colour and subsequently went viral.



Image © Audi

GUARDIAN OF THE GAL-AUDI

THE recent 2019 Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas saw visitors get the opportunity to try out a VR experience. Rocket's Rescue Run is the result of a deal between Audi, Disney, Marvel and a new startup called Holoride. The experience was created in collaboration with Disney's Games and Interactive Experiences unit and Holoride wants to make VR content to entertain ride-hailing passengers, using data from the cars about how they're moving through the world to match and enhance the movements of the experience. Rocket is an anthropomorphic raccoon and member of Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy.

CHINA

AN amusement park that features a giant swing that hurls people over a 100m high cliff in south-west China's Chongqing municipality is offering "regret medicine," allowing riders who lose their nerve to stop the launch of the swing. "The medicine is a simple vitamin tablet, which we started to offer in December," a park employee said. "The idea came from tourists. We took the advice to improve our service and do some good." All the money raised goes to charity.

SINGAPORE

THERE'S all manner of things that can be purchased via vending machine these days, but as far as *InterGame* is concerned, fresh Norwegian salmon is a first! Singapore now has a list of locations offering the fresh, lean fish with cashless payment taken care of by Nayax and its VPOS Touch readers. It's system even alerts operators in real-time if there are any problems with temperature or power. A 200g raw, frozen fillet will set you back SG\$5.90. Nothing fishy about that...

US

THE Ice Castles attraction at Lake Geneva in Wisconsin had to close during the recent cold snap to hit the mid-west because it was, well, too cold. Temperatures were plummeting to -25C, with a wind chill factor of up to -50C. The CEO of Ice Castles Ryan Davis commented: "No one should be outdoors for an extended amount of time in extreme sub-zero temperatures." The attraction is built completely out of ice and is one of five other locations - Utah, Minnesota, Colorado and New Hampshire, plus one in Alberta, Canada. The Lake Geneva location has tunnels, mazes, fountains and giant ice slides that are big enough for adults to play on.

PUNXS-VR-TAWNEY PHIL!

CLASSIC Bill Murray film *Groundhog Day* is getting a VR game sequel.

Classic Bill Murray film... OK, we'll stop now... Tequila Works and Sony Pictures Virtual Reality are working together on a game that puts players in the shoes of Phil Connors Jr, the son of Murray's Phil Connors and Rita Hanson. Jake Zim, senior vice president of the Sony Pictures VR group, told *Variety*: "We are not developing a new *Groundhog Day* movie; this is us expanding the storyline into a new format. We've taken *Groundhog Day* and put it into a musical, now we're putting it into an immersive experience."



US

PLAYING video games with colleagues can boost teamwork and performance at the office, according to a recent study. Researchers from Brigham Young University in the US found newly formed work teams experienced a 20 per cent increase in productivity on subsequent tasks after playing video games together for just 45 minutes. If Sega or BANDAI NAMCO would send us one of their latest cabinets, the team at IG Towers will be happy to put the theory to the test.

UK

NEILL Blomkamp, the South African director behind such movies as *District 9*, *Elysium* and *Chappie*, recently told the BBC that VR and AR are the way forward for the leisure dollar. "The future of entertainment is going to be along the lines of virtual or augmented reality," Blomkamp explained. "Audiences will be immersed in a world where they can see and move around in three dimensions." After recently directing a live action promotional video for Electronic Arts and Bioware's game, *Anthem*, he said that, in his opinion, the term "game" will be irrelevant in this future. "They'll just become interactive virtual worlds you're stepping into." In the meantime, *InterGame* would just like to see a *District 9* sequel please, Mr Blomkamp!

US

NOW, we're not saying we love "news" of a sensationalist nature, but when the headline "Drunken Monroe County woman accused of assaulting a pinball machine is facing charges after assaulting police officers," we simply couldn't resist. It turns out that one Kilee Cunningham allegedly took exception to a pinball machine that swallowed her money and didn't register a credit at the Blue Valley Lanes Bowling Alley in Plainfield Township, Michigan. Having been given a refund, she then punched the machine and was asked to leave. She refused and tried to order more drinks. Of course, staff wouldn't serve her, so she threw water at them and stormed out. Responding police officers found Cunningham on the road in somewhat of a state and only identified her via a medical marijuana ID card. As she was secured in the back of a patrol car, she struggled with officers, unbuckled her seatbelt, kicked an officer in the chest and headbutted him. Paramedics were called, who Cunningham spat at and bit. She was then sedated for the trip to the hospital, failed to post bail and was sent to Northampton County Prison to await her fate.

DEVILISH FUN

THE British Army's Freefall Parachute Regiment Display Team, the Red Devils, has been having a go on Frontgrid's ParadriftVR game. The company was started in 2017 by former soldiers Matts Wells and David Woodand who, it would appear, have been using their armed forces contacts to create some military-grade exposure for their growing brand. The globally renowned display team was apparently very impressed during its trip to iFly, an indoor skydiving destination in Basingstoke.



ITALY

ITALIAN operators demonstrated in the Plaza de Montecitorio in Rome on February 20 against "tax increases and the excessive power of the dealers who place hiring conditions that are increasingly vexatious and unsustainable." The demo was organised by the trade association SAPAR, which protests four tax increases in a few months - with more scheduled - and a promised new decree on machine gaming that has not materialised. This is in addition to local authority interference in a national scenario, makes life untenable.

US

ADULT amusement location operator Dave and Buster's has opened its 123rd location. It is the company's second to open in Pittsburgh and covers 40,000sq.ft of arcade games, sports viewing and F and B. It has 150 arcade games and a sports bar. The company's locations are all in the US, apart from two in Canada. Dave and Buster's opened 15 new stores last year and has signed 25 leases for more, so far 11 of which are now under construction.

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GREEN-FINGERED CHEF

EXECUTIVE chef Hanroe Erasmus at the luxurious The Palace in Sun City, the casino resort in South Africa, has hit the headlines for his rooftop garden. He identified a space on the resort roof and built a 75sq.m garden and greenhouse and has been busily harvesting vegetables and herbs from it all the past year.



PERU

ACCORDING to new statistics coming out of Peru, the country has 731 "slots floors," varying from gaming machine floors in licensed casinos to slots arcades spread around the country.

AUSTRIA

MANUFACTURING giant Novomatic has recruited Michael Barsin as sales manager for south-east Asia, based in Hong Kong. Only those with some longevity in the industry will remember his father, Peter Barsin, who for years was a distributor of amusement game boards in Hong Kong, before moving to South Africa where he is currently domiciled.

EAST AFRICA

THE Dubai-based Majid Al Futtaim group, one of the largest family entertainment centre operators in the Middle East, is planning further expansion in east Africa. The company already has one of its Magic Planet FECs in Kenya, in a mall in partnership with supermarket giant Carrefour. Alain Bejani, CEO at MAF, told a press conference recently that this year would see the group "deepening our presence in existing markets and opening in new markets, especially in east Africa."

SOUTH AFRICA

THE Emperors Palace casino in Gauteng, South Africa, ran its annual Garden of Lights and raised ZAR1.4m (€88,000). It was donated to various charities. Over 100,000 people visited the display of lights, funfair rides and food, held in the gardens of the Peermont D'Oreale Grande Hotel at Emperors Palace.

US

FOR aficionados of American football, Aaron Rodgers will be familiar as the quarterback for the NFL team Green Bay Packers. Rodgers will be a guest at the Bowl Expo to be held in Las Vegas at the Paris Hotel, June 23-27. He will be a speaker at the event, considered the major international trade show for tenpin bowling.

US

A FAMOUS name from pinball has been honoured in the US. Joe Kaminkow, these days a designer of casino slots, has been nominated for the Slot Awards Hall of Fame. Kaminkow installed video games in Massachusetts after leaving college but entered the development side with Williams Electronics, eventually teaming up with Gary Stern to start Data East Pinball and create games like The Simpsons, Jurassic Park and Star Wars.



WALMART ESPORTS

GROCERY giant Walmart has jumped on to the esports bandwagon with several in-store entertainment units opening offering tournament and esports play. Named the Walmart Esports Arena, these locations have become gaming hubs, each with 20 stations and customers playing with \$5 per hour.

UK

FEARS continue for British pubs - the principal venues for AWP machines - with one local pub closing down every 12 hours, according to the Campaign for Real Ale. The organisation said that 378 pubs closed between July and December last year. Since the start of last year, 854 have closed across Britain, but that is less than the 980 that closed in 2017. There are now 40,683 pubs in England, 2,901 in Wales and 3,612 in Scotland.

CYPRUS

CYPRUS has 4,333 gaming machines, up on the 4,133 registered in 2016. With a population of 1.2 million, this indicates a density of one machine for every 262 people.

SPAIN

THE coin machine magazine *Azar* in Spain, has revealed that former dictator Francisco Franco liked sports betting. Research had shown that the La Quiniela, the football betting system that was permitted during the Franco regime, started in 1946 and still continues today, but anecdotes reveal that the dictator himself enjoyed betting and in 1967 he spent 24 pesetas on a bet and won 2,848 pesetas, which today is less than €18. But it notes that in those days that win was the equivalent of half a month's salary.

MERKUR'S KICKERS

GAUSELMANN'S company football team, the Merkur Kickers, took part in the German Indoor Football Championship in Wiebelskirchen, Saarland, and came in third place. Eighteen company sports teams took part in the tournament, held this year for the 20th time. The Merkur team lost in the semi-finals but won the third place playoff.



SOUTH AFRICA

SUN International has become the first company in Africa to be recognised for sending zero waste to landfill. The big casino-operating company received the country's Green Building Council of South Africa Net Zero Waste rating for its Wild Coast Sun property.

FRANCE

BREAKDANCING is going to be a competition in the 2024 Olympics to be held in Paris, France. This being the case, the doors are wide open for a multitude of competitions and there is space for one more competition type for 2028 in Los Angeles, US, for which indoor skydiving - AKA bodyflight - is being considered. The sport involves balletic manipulation of the airflow with solo and team flyers being judged by a panel.

US

WE regularly cover trampoline park openings, but one that we haven't reported is an installation by ex-Microsoft chief Bill Gates. During his "Ask Me Anything" session on website Reddit recently, a user asked: "What's the most 'treat yo self' rich guy thing that you do?" Gates said: "I have a nice house. It includes a trampoline room. It seems kind of over the top but my kids love using it to work off their excess energy."

UGANDA

FIFTY illegally operating gaming machines have been seized and destroyed in a clampdown by the Uganda Lotteries and Gaming Regulatory Board. They were all taken in the Ntugamo district of the country.

Image courtesy of walmart.com



Othaim opens new Fabyland

SAUDI-based operator Al Othaim Leisure has opened its latest Fabyland family entertainment centre, in the Dragon Mart 2 shopping mall in Dubai.

The location has the typical Fabyland mix of rides and games, trampolines and a three-level soft play structure.

Dragon Mart 2 is a sister mall of Dragon Mart, the world's largest Chinese trading hub outside of mainland China and contains shopping, dining and entertainment. It has more than 1,000 shops and kiosks in 1.4m sq.ft of retail space.

Said Mohammad Attia, general manager at Al Othaim Leisure: "We are excited to launch Fabyland at Dragon Mart 2. The state-of-the-art family entertainment centre covers an expansive 14,000sq.ft of space and brings non-stop indoor entertainment for children of all age groups - fun-filled rides, action-packed gaming arcades and intriguing novelty machines with rewards for every level of skill.

"Our vision is to offer an experience of leisure combined with fitness and recreational options to families. We have set-up a 'futuristic' ambience at the facility featuring a wide range of thrilling rides and attractions for all age groups. We are also bringing My Town, a new concept that provides entertainment along with physical activities for toddlers, children, teenagers and adults."

Al Othaim has two other Fabyland locations in the UAE, the Deerfields Mall at Abu Dhabi and Dubai Festival City.

Three more Al Othaim locations are due to open next month, the company has confirmed. An Xtreme Zone and another Fabyland are due to open in the Mall of Muscat, Oman, and one Xtreme Zone in Abu Dhabi.

Dubai visitors up to 15.9m

THE emirate of Dubai in the UAE had 15.92 million international visitors during 2018, it has been revealed by the Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing - up 0.8 per cent up on the previous year.

China provided the biggest single increase of 12 per cent, with Saudi Arabia remaining second, growing three per cent to 1.6 million.

"Our strategic investments, innovative destination promotion programmes, responsive federal policy reforms and long-term global partnerships, all backed by the tremendous support of our stakeholders across the government and private sector, continue to yield strong results," said Helal Almarri, director general of the department.

In the past year Dubai has attempted to boost visitors with several initiatives including granting Russian and Chinese visitors visas on arrival and stepping up its programme of supporting events with amusement parks. India had the most tourists, with two million, while Saudi had 1.5 million. The UK remained in third place with 1.2 million visitors.

China is now in fourth position with 857,000 visitors, while Russia had 678,000 and Germany 567,000.

Bahrain mega-mall on schedule

THE 200-store Mall of Dilmunia, a US\$137m mega mall in Bahrain's Dilmunia Island, is on track for opening in October.

The mall will be shaped in a crescent and will stand overlooking a canal and landscaped area. Internally the venue will have technological features that will enable it to project images of the sky, fireworks and clouds with sound effects.

It will have Bahrain's first ice rink and other entertainment facilities and a total leasable area of over 47,000sq.m.



Annual staff meeting for Al Hokair

THE Al Hokair Group recently held its management and staff annual meeting at the Holiday Inn Half Moon Bay, in Al Khobar, not far from its headquarters in Dammam.

Vice president of the entertainment division, Mishal Al Hokair, and most of his senior management attended the event.

The meeting had the slogan Customer Loyalty, Quality, Safety, Development, and highlighted the main milestones in the past year, as well as hosted an exchange of views on the prospects for 2019.

The traditional awards for excellence were made. The best site award for financial achievement went to Sparky's Al Salam Mall, Riyadh; best site for quality improvement was Sparky's Dawadmi; the best entertainment site was Sparky's Panorama Mall, Riyadh; best entertainment site manager was Mazen Rajab; and best employee was Noor Asiri, from Sparky's Red Sea Mall, Jeddah.

Another loss but footfall up for DXB

DXB Entertainments, the parent company of Dubai's string of amusement parks, has announced a net loss of AED1bn (US\$272.2m), compared with a loss of 1.12bn (\$304.9m) 12 months ago, an 11 per cent improvement.

A net loss of AED268m in Q4 was a 5.1 per cent increase on the net loss of AED255m (\$61.2m) in the previous year. Analysts in the Middle East suggest that the company continues to struggle with "achieving meaningful growth in park arrivals and visitor spending." That park spend-per-visit was AED124, showing a fall of 11 per cent year-on-year.

Revenues in the quarter were AED149m, down five per cent. Footfall was 819,000 in the quarter and for the whole year 2.8 million visitors, but that was up by 22 per cent on the previous year. Operating expenses were AED728m compared with AED925m a cost saving of 21 per cent.

Last month, DXB reported that its plan to build a Six Flags park in Dubai had been shelved owing to a lack of finance available for the project.



Saudi heading for cashless

SAUDI Arabia is moving inexorably towards becoming a cashless society, says the country's monetary agency, SAMA.

Its governor, Dr Ahmed Abdulkarim Alkholifey, has gone on record as saying that the intention is to reduce the country's dependence upon cash by constant development of payments infrastructure to change to an electronic environment.

A cashless society is one of the objectives of the Financial Sector Development Programme, said Dr Alkholifey, speaking at the recent MEFTTECH, a banking and payments conference in Riyadh.

He said: "Over the past two and a half decades, SAMA has embarked on a process of developing payment systems in the kingdom and enriching them with the latest technical technologies that contribute to the advancement of economic development in our country while ensuring the independence of these systems without being affected by political and international changes. We are proud to have handled over 2.3 billion transaction in the last year alone."

Irish Gaming Show
March 5-6 | Dublin, Ireland

Another blow for Ireland

THE 40th Irish Gaming Show got under way in Dublin Red Cow Moran Hotel on March 5 to the tune of the same legal toing and froing the event has been privy to since time immemorial.

The main issue remains the same - the overarching legislation controlling gaming in Ireland is the Gaming and Lotteries Act of 1956. It's a piece of legislation that means Ireland's industry is governed on a local level rather than a national one, similar to Italy's legislative landscape, making it difficult for any industry decisions to be made on a national level. As well as this, manufacturers need to rely heavily on distributors to know where a machine will be legal to operate.

An updated piece of legislation called the Gambling Control Bill was passed in 2013 and fixes many of these issues but has yet to be enacted due to a number of issues in the Dail - the Irish parliament. Two years ago the main problem being cited was a legislative bottleneck in the Dail.

Most recently, David Stanton, minister of state for equality, immigration and integration, has said the internet and online gambling have evolved to such a point that the 2013 bill is already outdated and needs to be reconsidered before it can be enacted.

John Roche, general secretary for the Irish Amusement Trades Association, said: "He's now suggesting a piecemeal legislation known as the Gaming and Lotteries Amendment Bill. This will do very little to benefit our section of the industry. It will improve stakes and it will improve prizes and we certainly have no objection to that, but the fundamental issues are not being dealt with."

The group accepts that the sector needs to rethink in light of the online sector's growth. "What I don't accept is that he has to delay the rest of a perfectly generated piece of legislation after very expensive and time consuming Oireachtas [Ireland's legislature - Ed] hearings for the sake of one section. Surely the bill can



The Red Cow Moran Hotel

move forward and the online section can be dealt with as and when it needs to be. In fact, there's nothing to stop them from dealing with that section in a separate bill. There is no logic in what is happening here."

With the law being so fragmented in Ireland there has been a culture of legitimate arcade businesses running more dubious machines in a backroom. In recent months the revenue commission has made a number of seizures of these machines in a number of arcades.

Roche declined to comment in detail on this issue, as "litigation is ongoing in this case," but made it clear that "IATA does not accept the revenue's position."

The government piled on the problem with a sizable increase in the country's betting tax in the country's annual Budget, in October.

From January 1, 2019, the sports betting tax was raised from one per cent to two per cent in stakes from Irish customers, applying to retail, online and telephone sports books, and from 15 per cent to 25 per cent of betting exchange commissions from Irish customers.

Finance minister Pascal Donohue ignored warnings from the industry against increases, saying that it would threaten jobs. Now critics claim the industry will be hard-hit.

A spokesperson for the Irish Bookmakers Association, Sharon Byrne, said betting shops will be "devastated." She said the industry had lost 450 bookmakers' shops in the past eight years, each of them employing at least five people.

"We are estimating another 300 shop closures. We are down to around 850 shops across the country and with the new closures there will be many households, family businesses and people who gave their whole lives to their shops now out of a job."

Paddy Power Betfair said: "If these increased rates had applied to the group's Irish sportsbook stakes and exchange revenues in the 12 months ended June 30, 2018, we would have paid an additional £20m of betting duty."

The show itself was its usual casual affair. Towards the end of the expo, organiser John Purcell said: "It's been fantastic. Obviously every year we have the usual will-they-won't-they with the gambling bill and as a result we are apprehensive about the event every year, but



Who wants a telly?

when you see everyone turn up we know we're right to keep it going."

Many Irish people and businesses continue to be nervous about the implications of Brexit, with the Central Bank of Ireland giving evidence to a parliamentary committee in February estimating that in a no-deal scenario, economic growth was likely to be 3.2 per cent lower than forecast and that it would result in 50,000 fewer jobs.

"I can't see it interrupting our industry here very much," said Purcell. "Although there are a lot of UK vendors and suppliers here, with the way it is set up, they are mainly distributors of international product. It just means that this distribution will no longer come from the UK. There's a lot of eastern Europeans here, as well as Spanish and French distributors who all know they will have that free trade advantage to distribute here if the UK isn't going to do it."

"So the impact here will be minimal, but the impact for UK suppliers could be substantial."

A raffle held at the show raised almost €1,000 in aid of two charities, Bernardo's Children's Charity and the Down's Syndrome Association, through a raffle. Winners included John Vallis of Ideal, Peter Collinge of Bulldog and David Whitley of Whitehouse Leisure International.

This was followed by an auction in which a 50ins television and a drone were won by Hans Bierrum of Genesis for €500, while a collection of plush was won by Alan Crooks of Crooks Transport for €50.

The show's continued existence illustrates the industry's ability to stay on its feet in times of crisis, but one more right hook to the jaw could leave it on the ropes.

Ian Donegan



Enjoying a pint of the black stuff at the end of day one

Merkur introduces Avantgarde Trio to Ireland

MERKUR Gaming has introduced its slant-top, three-screened cabinet, the Avantgarde Trio, to Ireland.

Traditionally, companies have opted for the upright version for the Irish market to help maximise on space, but Markus Wessler, international sales director, believes the market is "ready for something new."

The cabinet was showcased at the Irish Gaming Show in Dublin at the beginning of March. The company now has 140 games in its library, all of which are available in Ireland.

The company also showed its new jackpot system, the Seven Temptations, which is also available in Ireland now, having first been unveiled during the ICE show in London.

"This is available in most of our games, out of 140 it is present in about 120 of them. It's an overlay, mystery jackpot with embedded symbols. You need two matching gems to get the jackpot," said Wessler.



Markus Wessler, international sales director, Merkur

JCM strengthens ICG relationship

SPANISH software developer ICG Group recently paid a visit to the JCM Global headquarters in Tokyo, Japan, to get an up-close look at JCM's new MRX modular banknote recycler, the company revealed at ICE in London, UK.

ICG has been a JCM customer for several years and utilises the company's iPRO-RC note-recycling bill validator in many of the solutions ICG provides to the hospitality, hotel and retail industries. It will now begin a live, global field test of the modular note-recycling MRX.

The MRX is a modular banknote recycler from the manufacturer for a wide range of payment terminals. Features include high-speed processing of two notes per second for accepting and dispensing; bulk note feed and payout of up to 15 notes, a flexible modular design and a 2,200-note capacity collection cassette.



JCM's new MRX modular banknote recycler

New licences for Whitehouse

WHITEHOUSE Leisure International, a plush manufacturer, has added two new Disney licences to its line-up in the form of Toy Story and The Lion King.

With two new movies coming out later this year based on the properties, this will likely prove to be a wise investment.

The new versions were exhibited at the Irish Gaming Show in Dublin at the start of March.

"Anyone hoping to see these or any of our product can do so at our newest show room in Dundalk, Dublin," said David Whitley, Whitehouse Leisure's head of sales for Ireland.



Whitehouse Leisure's Toy Story and The Lion King plush

Upgrade for Carnaby loyalty software

CARNABY Gaming Machines will be releasing an updated version of its Player Tracking System in April, which will run on Linux rather than Windows.

The product, a customer loyalty incentive offering, is aimed at AGCs.

"It's a totally different operating system that gives the operator far more control," said Carnaby boss Derek Lynch at the Irish gaming Show. "With Windows there are a lot

of updates that the operator hasn't any control over, and that upsets the system. Linux is open source, so there's no licensing."

He said it will be a more efficient, faster system. "It's taken us two years to develop, but it will be worth it. It will offer customers cashless options as well as loyalty points and the ability to send promotional text message updates out to customers."



Derek Lynch



John Stergides Jnr on The Beatles pinball

Electrocoin back at Dublin show

ELECTROCOIN arrived in Dublin for the Irish Gaming Show at the start of March with a swathe of its latest product.

Occupying one wall of its booth was its pinball offering, with two of its most popular licences, the Stern-manufactured The Beatles and Deadpool machines. The company returned to the show last year after a 10-year absence to find that demand had grown in the country for pinball.

"We had Star Wars and Guardians of the Galaxy last year and people really went for them, so we thought we'd try out two different models this time around and people are just as interested. I think pinball had kind of a quiet period here and now they're starting to come back," said the company's John Stergides Jnr.

As to why these two licences are ideal for the Irish market, he said that Deadpool was a friendly, fun game designed to be enjoyed by the casual player. "And The Beatles - well, it's the Beatles," he said.

Also on the stand was Skill Cut, first introduced at the EAG in January. The machine is a transparent case with one big prize inside being held up by a string. The player must hold down a button until a pair of scissors is level with the string and time it so that the blades cut it. If they manage to time this with pinpoint precision they get the prize.

"So, a bell will ring, the game will say 'Congratulations, you've won!' and it will instruct you to inform an attendant," said Stergides.

As it is one big prize, typically a large plush or a large bag of redemption tickets, the machine makes a lot of noise when the prize is won, reinforcing the idea of prize winning to other players in the location. The cabinet is available in a number of different colours including pink, yellow, green and blue, brightened with LED lighting.

GeWeTe spices up Cash Center

GEWETE has updated its Cash Center with a 27ins screen to give it "more presence in a gaming environment," said sales manager Mark Edmundson, speaking at the Irish Gaming Show.

Internally, Edmundson said, it has exactly the same specifications as the classic Cash Center.

"But when you look at a show like ICE and you see all the machines, with their bells and whistles, you realise a machine needs to look the part to compete in that environment," he added.

He said there isn't a huge price difference, but the screen gives an operation the opportunity to put its own logos or advertising on the screen.

Ireland's continued uncertainty with regards to gambling means that not many casino operators invest in cash handling technology, so "an updated model at a similar price will do well."

Also, "there are still the bingo halls, bowling clubs, AGCs and FECs, so we're not worried," he said.



Aristidis Tsikouras, managing director, GeWeTe, (left) with Mark Edmundson, sales manager

Conversion big business for NSM

THE jukebox manufacturer NSM Music is experiencing a lot of demand for the conversion of jukeboxes from analogue to online in Ireland.

"Before customers would have had 5,000-10,000 songs. With our library online they have access to about 300,000 songs, so there is a whole new generation of music at our online customers' fingertips," said Martin Agabeg, general manager.

This also incorporates the company's app, designed to choose what music to play on the jukebox from users' smartphones. This is quickly becoming a must have, according to several jukebox manufacturers.

He said contactless is rapidly taking off in Ireland. "I would say about 80 per cent of the machines we have sold here, even since January, have asked for contactless capability." This isn't surprising, he said, with "several large breweries in Britain saying that 70 per cent of their transactions with customers come in the form of contactless payment now."



NSM Music general Martin Agabeg (left) with sales manager Alex Kirby

ITM Leisure introduces new plush

ITM Leisure exhibited its latest plush at the Irish Gaming Show in Dublin in early March.

Ryan Hilton, the company's sales manager, said its generic unicorn range was selling best by far. "I don't know what it is, people just seem to love them," he said.

He said the company was also happy with its new Wildlife and Farmyard ranges, which it also had on show.



Ryan Hilton of ITM Leisure



Bronson Taylor, Let's Rock UK, owner (left) with Darren Chadwick, sales executive, Crown Leisure

Crown Leisure back in Ireland

CROWN Leisure returned to Dublin for the Irish Gaming Show in March, showing the Rainbow Catcher crane, Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory pusher and the E-Claw crane.

"Everything seems to be getting bigger and bigger every year, so we have concentrated on offering as much in as small a footprint as possible," said Derek Chadwick, sales executive.

Also on Crown's stand was Let's Rock UK, a changer manufacturer based in Leeds.

Owner Bronson Taylor explained he has designed the company's latest products, the Mega Changer and Multi Changer, to offer as many transactional options to the customer as possible.

"At the moment, the maximum you can change via contactless is £30, in the UK at least, and a lot of changers don't give you the option to decide how much you want to change, it's a set amount. So with our machines you can choose between £5, £10, £15, £20 or £30," he said.

Astrosystems sells big at ICE

THE UK branch of payment solutions provider Astrosystems reported a positive ICE London, with customers buying product on the spot.

"Usually, we would hope to get some contacts that we could follow up with later, but this show we actually had people coming to the stand and buying on the spot, which isn't always the case, so it has been a very good ICE for us," said general manager, Debbie Malin.

The UK continues to be a strong market for the company as its note acceptor technology increases in prominence. "We've had a challenge keeping up with demand for the GBA ST1C," she said.

The acceptor, particularly in its 110v AC version, has been utilised by many an operator since its inception and maintaining and increasing market awareness of the product is a constant challenge. The company is succeeding in this endeavour though; the industry has continued to respond well to the product's stringing protection and security, as well as its blue illuminated note guide for easy note insertion.

"This combination of optical and mechanical anti-stringing technologies has placed the GBA ST1C into an enviable position where fraudsters cannot string the note acceptor and gain false credits," said Malin.



Debbie Malin, general manager, Astrosystems

ICE tops 36,000 visitors

FOR the eighth consecutive year the ICE show in London has broken its attendance records.

The 2019 show registered 36,092 visitors, up eight per cent on the previous year.

The figures will now go for independent audit, said the show's organiser, Clarion Gaming. Its managing director, Kate Chambers, said: "These are very encouraging and, of course, I'm delighted to be able to report on what would be our eighth consecutive year of growth."

"I would like to pay tribute to our exhibitors who once again brought fantastic theatre and creativity to their ICE London show presence, contributing magnificently to the energy and atmosphere visitors experienced at ExCeL London. The event industry has a tendency to be consumed by attendance when actually it's the chemistry of an event and, as a result, the quality of the interactions and connections that take place between visitor and exhibitor, visitor and visitor and between exhibitors that really count and which distinguish a good show from a great show."

"The internationalism of ICE London remains a stand out characteristic and the global gaming industry turned out in force with representatives from Botswana and Honduras raising the number of nations present at ExCeL London to 155 - a remarkable statistic by any standards. The figures are showing fantastic growth from key geographical regions, notably LatAm, which recorded an increase of 43 per cent."

Now the ICE brand moves to Boston, US, for the first ICE North America from May 13-15. That new event has drawn support from 45 international organisations and will cover sports betting, igaming, affiliate marketing, lottery and esports.

Sega line-up for Vegas show

SEGA Amusements

International was set to take a comprehensive line-up of video games to the Amusements Expo in Las Vegas (March 26-27).

ATV Slam will make its US debut with its realistic quad bike on custom-developed air cylinder-based motion platform. The game is one of all-terrain vehicle racing on a 47ins high definition screen with air cannons giving wind effects.



Popular current games such as House of the Dead: Scarlet Dawn, the zombie horror game with its 3D-moulded cabinet, will be there, with Transformers: Shadows Rising, the licensed game in a truck-shaped cabinet. Also on the booth will be Target Bravo: Operation Ghost, the action adventure game, and Daytona Championship USA in its standard sized cabinet. Storm Racer in the deluxe motion cabinet will make up the rest of the presentation.

ITL at EuroCIS

THE main trade show for retail technology, EuroCIS, in Düsseldorf, was the latest target for UK cash processing company Innovative Technology.

"Our Spectral product range attracted most attention with note validators, recyclers and now a new bunch not feeder module," said Thorsten Labusch, vice-president of sales and business development.

"This 80-note mixed denomination recycler for high volume retail applications can store all denominations from a given currency managing coin float levels in self-checkouts more efficiently, eliminating coin starvation."

The new addition to the range uses the established NV200 Spectral banknote validator.

The company also showed the Spectral Bunch Note Feeder that can take a large deposit of 100-plus bills. SmartSafe was also attracting attention with its new interface add-on option permitting bills to be transported to the cash box via a safe interface. The new age verification device was also on display.



Easitrax the CPI star

REVIEWING ICE, Crane Payment Innovations sales director for EMEA gaming, Anette Jauch, said that the company's coin and banknote validators had done well, but the star was the Easitrax Connect platform and the CPI Ticket Purchasing Kiosk.

The validators included the SC Advance note handling device and now it can come with a hardware/software platform to combine it with real time payment connectivity. Easitrax Connect will help operators to manage their floors and cash better than before.

The technology provides a wealth of features and benefits and it will work intuitively. Operators now have a real time view of all of their note validators and how they - and the machines - are performing. The drop can be managed to the extent where full cashboxes do not affect play as a warning is sent to the operator as the box nears capacity. Dubious bills are also identified immediately and maintenance issues are raised before a breakdown even occurs.

"Easitrax Connect is simple to install - there are just three elements to it," explained Jauch. "First, you need our small Universal Connectivity Box that easily attaches to our SC Advance banknote validators. Then, you bring the hardware online by connecting it to a casino's ethernet network. This is what enables the real time data to be shown on the final piece of our Easitrax Connect solution - our mobile-friendly web application. That's it. The UCB is future proof to connect to other devices later down the road - like cashless and mobile payment devices."

The Ticket Purchasing Kiosk is CPI's response to the cashless situation. Players who do not carry banknotes or prefer cashless payments to buy TITO tickets can select the amount to be deducted from their card and it is paid out as a TITO ticket.



Busy SuzoHapp happy with ICE

A POSITIVE post-ICE verdict from SuzoHapp was voiced by Goran Sovilj, executive vice president of gaming and amusement in Europe.

He said: "We were grateful for the opportunity to show so many customers, new and old, our ever-improving product offering. We have transformed into a complete solution provider for sports betting and cash management, while maintaining our roots in components. We thank everyone who took the time to come to our stand at ICE."

He said that the company's new booth position was busy on all three days and the main attractions were the range of LCD display including the VisionPro Edge-Lit touch and non-touch monitors and Elo Touch Solutions' open frame monitors. The company also showed toppers, push buttons and LCD button decks, locks and Nanoptix printers, plus Newland barcode scanners.

"The message is that we can simplify your sourcing," noted Mike Sigona, SuzoHapp's global gaming product manager and business development manager in Europe. "We offer every single component an operator or manufacturer may need. We can advise our customers on the best individual product for each part of their machine. This message was especially appreciated at the sports betting section of our booth."

First for IAAPA's Spring Summit

REGISTRATION is now open for IAAPA's first ever event in Finland and Russia.

The IAAPA EMEA Spring Summit 2019 offers attendees the chance to network with industry colleagues and experience the attractions of Linnanmäki and Särkänniemi in Finland. Participants will take part in seminars on dynamic pricing, attend exclusive EDUTours and take part in a tour to Haltia - The Finnish Nature Centre.

Visitors will also have the opportunity to visit St Petersburg, Russia, and experience Divo Ostrov amusement park, attend a Russian ballet night at the Mariinsky Theater and visit the State Hermitage Museum of Art and Culture during an optional, add-on post tour.

The event is due to run from May 14-15 at the Radisson Blu Plaza, Helsinki, and the Original Sokos Hotel Ilves, Tampere. The post tour will be at Solo Sokos Palace Bridge, St Petersburg.



Image © Cryonic07_Wikipedia

Sega's ATRAX success

SEGA wrapped up another successful ATRAX show in Turkey with its distribution partners Meridyen Games and Trio Games Group.

Visitors got to experience Sega's games such as House of the Dead: Scarlet Dawn, ATV Slam and Transformers: Shadows Rising. There were also new games from ICE such as Super Kixx Pro, Whack A Clown, and Tons of Tickets, a self-refilling RFID ticket crane.

Elvis Akay, general manager of Meridyen Games, said: "We are very excited to be showing Sega's latest games and especially pleased to be the first in Turkey to sell the iconic House of the Dead: Scarlet Dawn."

Martin Riley, international sales manager from Sega, commented: "ATRAX is a very important show for us; it's our best opportunity to meet operators from Turkey and neighbouring regions."



Taylan Ozbek and Murat Eyleblebici from Trio Games Group featuring Transformers: Shadows Rising



(l-r) Elvis Akay, Ismail Akar, Javad Ghahri all from Meridyen Games at ATRAX featuring House of the Dead: Scarlet Dawn

Spanish show sold out

SPAIN'S major show for the gaming industry will be held from April 9-10 at the IFEMA fair grounds in Madrid. The International Gaming and Gambling Trade Show – it used to be the FER – has sold out all of its 16,200 sq.m of space with 120 stands, 20 per cent of which are from countries outside of Spain.



GeWeTe launches Cash Center Premium

AN initiative by cash handling specialist GeWeTe at ICE saw the launch of the Cash Center Premium, an upmarket version of the company's highly successful Cash Center Compact Casino product.

The new product has a sleek, black design and extra-large, 27ins side-lit LCD touchscreen monitor. The size of the monitor has opened up a fresh opportunity for operators in that it provides advertising and video capability.

The unit has the same technology as the Compact Casino model. Said Aristidis Tsikouras, managing director: "We have really stepped up a gear here. The feedback was absolutely amazing at ICE and we were busy taking orders for our new Casino Center Premium on all three days of the show."

The Premium offers all the requirements a casino operator may have: ticket handling/ticket in, ticket out, cash-in and cash-out and payout of all winning tickets. It handles player/customer cards. It can be connected to many casino management systems.

"We had more than 10 of our team at ICE. We will continue to invest to ensure that our customers can expect the dedicated and focused support we give. We care very much about what we do and customer support - offered by GeWeTe personnel - is just as much part of our strategy as being able to completely manage the entire product cycle - from development through to manufacturing to sales and support. We believe that having direct customer contact is a key factor as well," concluded Tsikouras.

NAMOA partners AHG show

AUSTRALIA'S best-known event for the amusement industry, the AHG Expo, held at Brisbane, March 27-28, now has the official endorsement of the National Amusement Machine Organisation Australia (NAMOA) behind it.

The show, to be held in the Brisbane Convention Centre, Queensland, is principally for the gaming industry, but has a strong amusement element to it. NAMOA is to be a partner sponsor for the event.

Said the organisation's president Tony Argeri: "The objective is to support and promote Australian distributors and also manufacturers from the rest of the world, to the hotel, club and restaurant market here."

Among the amusement exhibitors will be Zax Amusements, AMD and Cashflow Games, which are combining to provide new machines on free play in a large lounge area. This will have a media wall and a giant "blower machine" in which club managers can try to grab discount tickets or prize awards.

IEA registration opens

REGISTRATION is now open for the IAAPA Expo Asia (formerly known as the Asian Attractions Expo), which will take place from June 11-14 at the Shanghai New International Expo Centre in Shanghai, China.



More than 8,500 global amusement park and attractions industry professionals from more than 60 countries will gather to buy, learn and network at the largest international conference and trade show for the multibillion-dollar attractions industry in Asia.

The 11,000sq.m trade show floor will feature innovations from more than 300 exhibiting companies displaying the latest products and services the industry has to offer.



APRIL 30-MAY 1: InterFun Expo, Royal Armouries, Leeds, UK.

www.interfunexpo.com

Details: InterFun Expo, *InterGame's* own amusement show, will take place for the first time in Leeds, UK, at New Dock Hall, Royal Armouries Drive from April 30 – May 1. The event is free to attend and is targeted at managers and operators of indoor and outdoor adventure parks, nature parks, wildlife facilities and family entertainment venues. It will be the perfect event for those looking to offer new experiences for families or keen to refresh their existing facilities. Visitors can expect a product showcase and seminars featuring a number of guest speakers.

APRIL 1-4:
CinemaCon 2019, Caesars Palace, Las Vegas, US.
www.cinemacon.com

APRIL 9-10:
Sports Betting East Africa 2019,
Kampala, Uganda.
www.sportsbettingevents.com/sbea

APRIL 21-23:
Saudi Entertainment & Amusement (SEA) 2019,
Jeddah Centre for Forums & Events, Jeddah,
Saudi Arabia.
www.saudientertainmentandamusement.com

APRIL 23-25:
Betting on Sports America 2019, New York, USA.
www.sbcevents.com/betting-on-sports-america-2019/

MAY 8-9:
Northern Showcase 2019, Wellington Park,
Burlington Gardens, Leyland, PR25 3AB, UK.
www.crowndirect.co.uk

MAY 9-11:
AAA 2019 – 15th Asia Amusement & Attractions
Expo, China Import & Export Fair Complex,
Guangzhou, China.
www.aaaexpos.com

MAY 9-11:
13th Guangzhou International Billiards
Exhibition (GBE 2019), China Import & Export
Fair Complex, Guangzhou, China.
www.gbechina.com

MAY 15-17:
HD Expo 2019– Hospitality Design Exposition &
Conference, Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas, US.
www.hdexpo.com

MAY 19-21:
IATP Annual European Conference & Trade
Show 2019, Maritim Hotel, Berlin, Germany.
www.indoortrampolineparks.org

MAY 24:
Asia Esports Forum, Macau.
www.AsiaEsportsForum.com/Macau

JUNE 5:
Park Avenue Open Day 2019, Park Avenue,
London, UK
www.electrocoin.net

JUNE 11-14:
IAAPA Expo Asia 2019, Shanghai New
International Expo Centre, Shanghai, China.
www.iaapa.org/AsianAttractionsExpo

JUNE 23-27:
Bowl Expo 2019, Paris Hotel & Las Vegas
Convention Center, Las Vegas, Nevada, US.
www.bowlexpo.com

JULY 23-25:
Sports Betting West Africa 2019, Lagos, Nigeria.
www.sportsbettingevents.com/sbwa

AUGUST 13-15:
AGE 2019 - Australasian Gaming Expo, ICC
Sydney, Darling Harbour, Sydney, Australia.
www.austgamingexpo.com

AUGUST 20-24:
Gamescom 2019, Cologne, Germany.
www.gamescom-cologne.com

SEPTEMBER 3-5:
Entertainment Arena Expo 2019, Romexpo
Exhibition Center, Bucharest, Romania.
www.earena.ro

SEPTEMBER 16-19:
IAAPA Expo Europe 2019, Paris Expo Porte de
Versailles, Paris, France.
www.iaapa.org/eas

SEPTEMBER 17-20:
Betting on Sports 2019, London, UK.
www.sbcevents.com/betting-on-sports-2019

OCTOBER 1-2:
ACOS 2019 - The Autumn Coin Op Show,
Olympia, London, UK.
www.coin-opshow.co.uk

OCTOBER 7-10:
Pubcon Pro Las Vegas 2019, Las Vegas,
Nevada, US.
www.pubcon.com

OCTOBER 13-14:
Leisure Supplies Show 2019, Staffordshire
Showground, Stafford, UK.
www.leisure-supplies-show.co.uk

OCTOBER 15-17:
Foundations Entertainment University, Dallas,
Texas, US.
www.foundationsuniversity.com

Top of the table

Sport remains a highly reliable format on which to base games. **Ian Donegan** takes a look at the latest developments in athletically inspired amusements

SPORT is one of the great unifiers; many who don't religiously follow football still tune in for the World Cup every four years.

Programmed television is in trouble at the moment, as people can watch whatever they like on streaming services whenever they like, but sport is different. As any fan will tell you, if you're going to watch sport you need to watch it live. Recording a game and watching it later just isn't the same; there's an immediacy and a public camaraderie in sport that is more difficult to find in the digital age.

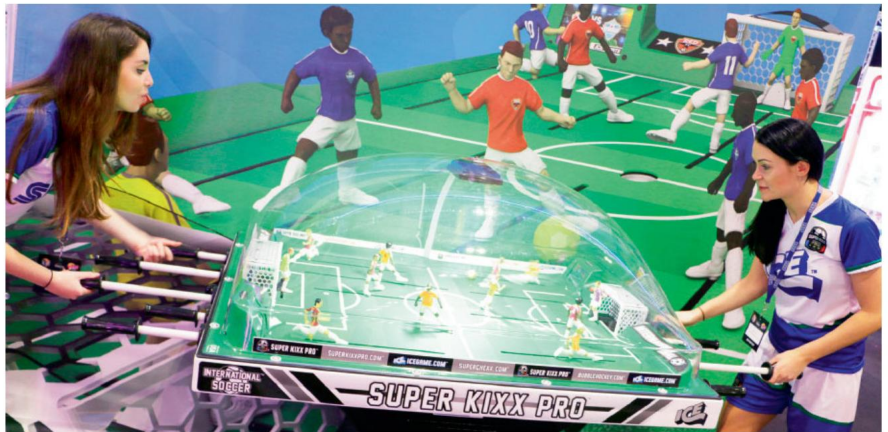
This extends into the FEC arena where individuals are happy to be left alone to play video games. There is obviously a degree of community in digital entertainment, with friends cheering each other on and trying to beat each other's scores, but this exists sevenfold in games that simulate sports that players are already familiar with. This piggybacking of sporting discernment has been highly instrumental in the ongoing success of these games.

"The most successful and reliable amusement games are simple, fun and intuitive," said Mark Lense, international sales manager for the US-based amusement manufacturer Bay Tek Entertainment. "Offering sports amusement in your games room helps with the intuitiveness as it brings with it the familiarity and fun. Of course, not all sports are created equal in the game room. Football is a little trickier, a little more intimidating than basketball. Some people will just flat out not play a football game because they're not as comfortable with the movement of football. Whereas throwing a basketball is a lot less intimidating."

Bay Tek has certainly created a wide variety of games that fulfil these needs. Hot Shot is a full-sized basketball game. It is 10ft high, has a regulation-size rim, official free throw distance and professional basketballs, all to enhance this sense of authenticity.

Connect 4 Hoops is another basketball game but with a twist - one or two players shoot baskets and watch as their basketballs fall into place on the LED-projected grid. The first player to align four balls in a row on the playfield wins. This game is a little less intimidating than Hot Shot, appealing to sports enthusiasts as well as non-sports players. Plus, the classic licence gives people a general idea of gameplay.

"Although Skee-Ball isn't considered a sport outside the game room, we figure if bowling is a sport, so is Skee-Ball! At 110 years old, it's the



Super Kixx Pro

oldest, most well-known arcade game on the market. Definitely a mainstay in the industry and it's not going anywhere," he added.

Many would also consider it dubious to describe pinball as a sport, but that hasn't stopped some high profile competitions taking place.

Zach Sharpe, one of the world's leading pinball players and director of communications for the US-based pinball manufacturer Stern, told *InterGame*: "Competitive pinball has captured the attention and interest of men, women and children all around the globe. There are now over 65,000 ranked players who are showcasing their individual skills in more than 5,400 different events and leagues being staged annually. And these numbers keep increasing at a dramatic rate. Stern Pinball is increasing that exposure on a larger scale through the Stern Pro Circuit."

Recently, Stern Pinball held its Stern Pro Circuit, which included 20 of the largest pinball tournaments held around the world. Sharpe described it as the premier pinball tournament circuit on the planet that "is shining the spotlight on pinball as a true sport."

Partnering with eBay, the event featured the 40 highest ranked pinball players in the world competing for the coveted Stern Pro Circuit Championship Belt at the Bottom Lounge in Chicago, Illinois on Saturday, March 9. The event was hosted by Brian "Q" Quinn from *Impractical Jokers* and featured a live performance by Ed Robertson of Barenaked Ladies fame. This illustrates the buzz that tournaments can incite; they are an ideal way to draw customers and create a sense of community.

Simulating more traditional sports is Sega with one of its latest creations, in collaboration with ICE, Super Kixx Pro. This could be described as an update

on the foosball table but that is almost doing it a disservice. The game is more dynamic, with each of the miniature players capable of 360-degree horizontal spins as well as movement up and down the field of play. The game is so distinct from foosball that Justin Burke, general manager of Sega Amusements, believes that the two can coexist peacefully.

"The gameplay just feels a lot more exciting," he said. "The unique shape of the ball and the sensors in the goals that cue audience cheering sounds, mixed with the fact that four people can play at once, make this an ideal sporting game."

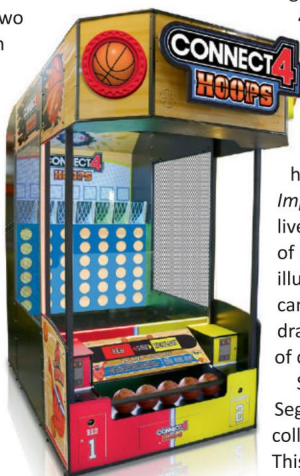
Sega also produces a line of basketball machines, including Sonic Basketball, which have the advantage of being fun for one player to use on their own or two if they want some competition.

"And if the arcade has a number of these machines, there is the option for further competitive play," he added.

Garlando, a foosball table manufacturer that has been in business since 1954 and produces 43 different models, has a line that caters specifically to the professional games sector.

"We have been making our football tables for tournaments since 2002," said Enrica Orecchia, sales manager. "In 2006, we started to adapt our tables and create new models following the players' technical requirements. That is how our International Table Soccer Federation-authorised tables were born: World Champion, Master Champion and Pro Champion are all competition models used in the different competition categories. Their structure and technical features exploit the best of Garlando technical development in football tables together with the players chosen features."

Also producing foosball tables specifically for professional tournaments is Roberto Sports. The company's sales manager, Nadia Barham, said the company has noticed more and more parents interested in getting foosball for their kids as they are worried about the amount of time they



Bay Tek's Connect 4 Hoops

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Sonic Sports Kids Basketball

spend looking at screens on various devices.

"We have noticed our sales around Christmas increasing," she said.

Bringing a more casual dimension to the table game is UNIS, with the revitalisation of Pong in the form of a coffee table game.

"There is a lot of demand for a casual sports game for the café and bar market. Our Pong game does this, but is also an effective competitive game. I have personally run player tournaments at trade events," said Steven Tan, general manager for UNIS.

When the first Pong Table was released, it reached the masses through viral video content and coverage globally. As the coffee table has grown in popularity, UNIS has decided to bring Atari Pong back into arcades, cineplexes and amusement centres. Its new products, the Atari Pong Arcade and Cocktail tables, are designed with adjustable height capabilities, USB charging ports, the classic Pong game and numerous speed levels.

While many sports need to undergo massive changes to make them playable in an FEC setting, there are those that need only a little tweak. Darts is a good example of this.

Diana Marketing is a supplier of electronic darts machines based in Spain.

The company's sales manager, Nicholas Buckley, said: "Darts is one of the few physical sports that has been able to adapt to an amusement game. I see many limitations when it comes to adapting a sport to a machine, especially when we refer to outdoor sports. I can only assume that as technology evolves more and more sports can be taken indoors, however there will always be a limitation as to how true to the original game it can ever be."

Imitating the field of play in larger scale sports games has been an ambitious undertaking; however, this has been successfully offered up by a UK company, Sports Simulator, in its namesake solution, which incorporates a huge interactive screen to depict various arenas.

"Our Sports Simulator is already the most comprehensive multi-sports simulator in the world," said Adrian Cowle, the company's technical support manager.

It offers 20 sports, over 300 game challenges and over 1,125 interactive sporting venues from around the world. At present, the sports available include football, American football, tennis, cricket, rugby union, rugby league, baseball, basketball, ice hockey, field hockey,



A Virtuix Omniverse tournament

footgolf, mini-golf, Australian rules football, Gaelic football, bandy, contest golf, disc golf, handball and softball.

Also, embracing this growth in technology is the rapidly evolving format of esports-style tournaments. Virtuix, a virtual reality manufacturer, organises monthly Omniverse esports tournaments at location-based entertainment venues, on its Omni VR motion platform. In January's contest, 50 per cent of participants were returning players, including nine of the top 10 teams from the previous contest, the company's founder, Jan Goetgeluk, told *InterGame*.

"Over the four-day contest, the top three teams played an average of 12 times, with the top 20 teams playing an average of seven times. One team played 20 times. This demonstrates the draw and repetitive play potential of competitive esports at FECs. Esports stimulates repeat play and enables operators to build a local community of return players," he explained.

Esports, he believes, is a general term to describe competitive video gaming, so the term "sports" is misleading - esports have nothing to do with existing physical sports.

"That said, to gain mass market appeal, we believe that esports requires an active, physical component. Popular anchor attractions that do attract regular, repeat players - for example, bowling, laser tag, go-karting - all include a physical activity," he added.

Physical or not, it does seem like VR lends itself to esports and there are several companies with a great deal of faith in the idea.

"It would be insane not to evaluate new ways of integrating VR into this space," said Jürgen Kayser, public relations manager for the Germany-based VR manufacturer Hologate.

"Especially thinking about the attractiveness of full-body multiplayer gameplay compared to classic gaming where the only action is clicking buttons. So currently, most of the attention of spectators is aimed at screens, while the athletes behind those avatars is just a supplement. With VR those participants can merge with the digital content, leading to a more player oriented representation of the sport.

"It's a long journey and we are working hard to pave the way as fast as possible. But if we think about five years from now, VR can be the key to bringing classic sports closer to esports and offer a gateway in-between both independent activities. All happening at FECs, which already have the best infrastructure to host this transformation."

He believes FECs have a huge amount of potential to attract more than just casual customers, but also returning customers on a weekly or even daily routine.

"This could lead to after-school or after work training, regular weekend tournaments or annual championships, similar to the widespread usage of sports clubs on an amateur level, which are an integral part of members' weekly lifestyle. FECs could benefit from this by offering different monetisation models for their customers, as flat usage fees or constant memberships could be more attractive to returning customers," said Kayser.

If a site is considering new games or installing its very first ones, those mentioned above are sure to give the business, at the very least, a sporting chance.

Hockey licence

ALTHOUGH sport games have a lot of strength in their own right, a strong licence can never hurt.

The DC Comics-inspired *Joker vs Batman: Laughing Madness* air hockey, for instance, asks players to choose between either character.

At the sound of the Joker's laugh the "madness" begins and dozens of mini pucks are released from the centre tower onto the playfield. This joins another BN unit, DC Comics Joker's Wild air hockey, developed in association with Sam Billiards, which also features Batman and his arch nemesis, the Joker. With interactive LED lighting effects and new sounds, the table features a high-quality design and a killer licence. Both games prove to be a big hit with players as well as fans of DC Comics IPs.



Joker vs Batman: Laughing Madness air hockey table

A consistent performer

Billares SAM has broadened its offering with cranes, but is still bringing its wide range of sports games to the market

HAVING been predominantly a producer of sports table games for the majority of its existence, Billares SAM has turned its hand to the manufacturing of cranes in the last couple of years.

In setting out to make a new line of cranes, the company decided the most important aspect would be the same as any other product it manufactures - reliability.

"The cranes range keeps growing, so we have now many different types and sizes of hooks and they can hold up to a basketball sized toy. So the machine is growing in size too. As well as that, for percentage set machines we have one with double deposit. If the main toy is not collected, a consolation toy is always delivered," said the company's head of design, Pablo Madariaga.

Billares SAM's bread and butter has historically been in the production of sports games.

It cites English and American pool tables as one of its best selling products, having produced classic examples like its Magno, K.Steel2 and Elite tables.

"I think that cue games are the classics, so it is very difficult to imagine that they could ever disappear. In fact, professional snooker, for instance, is becoming more and more popular worldwide, so this will work in favour of other games like pool or carom. And I wouldn't be surprised if more and more snooker clubs started to appear in different countries. Carom billiards remains very popular in regions like South America and the Far East. So I think all these games are here to stay," he said.

He explained that a great deal of the company's appeal, as well as its products, is its attention to detail in customer service. "All of these tables have been updated with new standard finishes, but we always try to match the client needs with special finishes if they need them," he added.



The company has a brand new range of air hockeys it is calling Evo2. They have a new LED illuminated surface that flashes in synchronisation to help make it seem more eventful when a goal is scored and when coin is put into the machine.

The range includes a new closing system for the puck door. It consists of just one lock, but a hinged steel bar across the door, so security is doubled. As well as that, the playing surface is now hinged. This makes it easier to access the inside of the cabinet for assembly or replacing parts.

He believes that while foosball has a lot of potential, "it is not as popular as it could be in many countries. Compared with pool or with coin-op air hockey, it needs a smaller space, but four people can still play it together, so the coin-op table soccer can be very profitable from a commercial point of view. We also have our Tempo foosball table for outdoors."

This year, the Soccer Table World Championship will take place in Spain, and SAM's Tecno table will be the field of play.

"Our Tecno and Forte Max tables are becoming a worldwide standard for this game. And we are proud to be the designers," he said.

The company is still thinking outside the box on how to expand its offering, but believes it is too soon to make any announcements. "We are always thinking about new products, but let's wait for them to be in the market before we reveal anything," he said.

One of the great benefits of sports games, from an operator's point of view, is being able to organise tournaments. These not only gather a lot of people into a site at one time, but also create a sense of community that helps get those same customers back in the door at a later date.

"Of course getting involved in championships and tournaments is always important and also designing games that can appeal to the whole family. Games that require skill, but

are not too difficult, so that everyone from small kids to adults are able to get involved. Also, the 'not betting' concept is important. We are not promoting an addictive game, as the only reward is your own pride of beating the opponent, or achieving a goal," he said.

This social aspect of sports games is what has helped them to remain popular among a generation for whom the mass majority of entertainment comes via an electronic device.

He believes that the physical element of these games is key to their success. This becomes evident when one tries computer games that try to imitate them. It's just not the same thing. If you have never tried pool, for instance, you may enjoy a computer simulator of it, but if you have tried the real thing you know there is no replacing it.



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Indoor skydiving: not just a flight of fancy

As indoor skydiving starts to be taken more seriously as a sport and grows in popularity as an amusement, **Ian Donegan** asks 'is it time to invest?'

THERE are any number of cultural differences between all regions throughout the world, but one unifying factor is that one dream that everyone has had at one point in their lives - to be able to fly.

Even a group of kids having the classic "if you could have one superpower, what would it be?" conversation will have at least one of them wanting to be able to fly.

This is one of the many elements that explains the increased uptake in indoor skydiving, also known as "bodyflight," that we have seen in recent years.

The amusement sets out to recreate the free-fall sensation a person might experience from jumping out of a plane.

"If you close your eyes it's the exact same feeling as skydiving, but there are less challenges due to gravity," said Simon Ward, the international president of iFly, one of world's leading operators and suppliers of indoor skydiving. He is responsible for the company's business everywhere outside of the Americas.

One point about the experience that Ward is keen to educate people on is that this is a *skill*. There is a perception that it is the kind of thing a person steps into, they are lifted up for a bit then do something else.

It takes a month to train an attendant to be able to teach customers be able to fly effectively in one session. Ward said the company doesn't look for people with skydiving experience for this, but for people with great customer service, who are fit and good with people.

He likens learning this skill to skiing, insofar as "I can explain the theory of how to ski all day, but until you put the skis on and go down a hill you can't know what that feels like."

On their first try, customers are instructed to lean into the air and an instructor will be standing in front of them. They will help the customer adjust their body position until they are in a stable position and are able to use their arms, legs and core body to change their direction in the tunnel.

The most important part of instructor training is to be able to help customers should they get into trouble or distress.

From the offset, Ward said the company's priority was safety, to the point that he now has complete confidence in the attraction's safety, "so anyone in the family can do it. We will literally fly anyone from four to 104, and we have flown younger than that and we have flown a 102-year-old."

The training standards body in this industry is the International Bodyflight Association. The basic course takes a month and is about getting the instructor adept at moving around the tunnel and then to start to look after the customer.



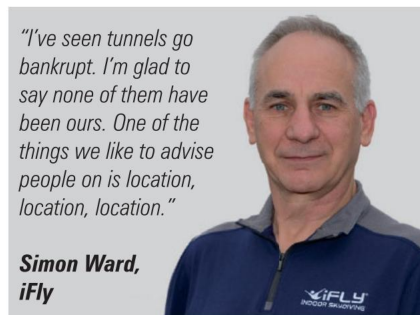
Miss France being swept off her feet

"And what we are looking for is that if a customer were ever to get into trouble, if they, for instance, started to lose their stability or turned upside-down in mid-air, we want to be able to spot them in early days."

He said he is confident enough in the tunnel's inbuilt safety features that the possibility of instructors needing to prevent someone actually getting hurt is one in five million. "So that training is all about making sure that whatever position we put our customers in, we are always in complete control of their safety," he said.

If an operator decides they want to install a tunnel today, they would need about \$10m and will need planning permission. There are different models with some being better in a mall and others are suited to outdoor locations.

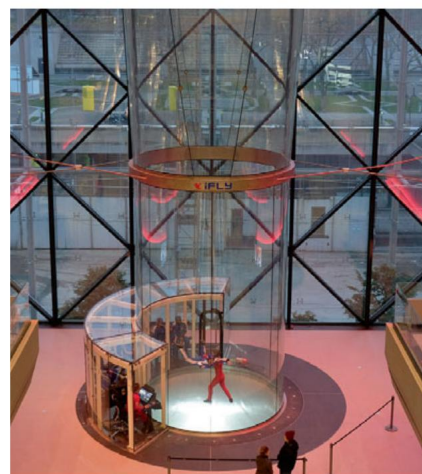
The construction time of a tunnel at the moment is about eight months, but iFly have developed a more modular approach and expect to be installing them in four months in, hopefully, the not-too-distant future.



"I've seen tunnels go bankrupt. I'm glad to say none of them have been ours. One of the things we like to advise people on is location, location, location."

Simon Ward,
iFly

On ROI, Ward said: "I've seen tunnels go bankrupt. I'm glad to say none of them have been ours. One of the things we like to advise people on is location, location, location. What happens is you'll have a bunch of enthusiastic skydivers, who maybe aren't that business savvy



An iFly tunnel in Paris

and will build a tunnel but put it in a crappy place where it folds. It's important not to take passions and try to make a business out of it - rather, be able to see the business potential in something and then get passionate about it. But in a decent location this will return a reasonable profit, there's no doubt about that."

As a result of this business savvy and growing investor confidence, iFly has an impressive distribution, having installed on every continent "and some of the oceans - we have them on three Royal Caribbean cruise ships at the moment and two more are in production."

In the immediate future, the company has additional projects planned in Hong Kong, China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Auckland, the US, several countries in the Middle East, Denmark, Germany and Italy. "Although we are not yet in the Antarctic, but give us time," said Ward.

From a participant point of view, Ward said there isn't much difference from one country to another, agreeing that we have all indeed dreamed of flying "so we tapped into that universal market," he said.

The skill element is an important aspect of the business point. Anyone who has done axe throwing will recognise how their skill progresses over their first training session and will have that urge to go back and get better. Ward said that indoor skydiving has very much the same dynamic and the company leans into this with a debriefing session for the customer afterwards. "We highlight their progress and the things they could get better at and how they could achieve this. With this approach, we see a 20 per cent return rate," he said.

For the people who start to master the skills, the IBA sanctions a number of events around the world that iFly runs in its tunnels. "We have a whole set of rules, a number of different competitions just like we get in any other sport, and the world championships in the sport are being held from April 16-20 in Lille, France," he said.

Manu Ars is a French bodyflight competitor, having been involved in the sport since its birth in 1997. He was on the French national parachuting team and started bodyflight merely as another way to train, but got hooked.

"Indoor skydiving is a very technical sport, whatever the discipline you pick, from team formation skydiving to solo freestyle, from dynamic to fast head down," he told *InterGame*.

He explained that synchronising moves with partners is a challenge when flying on a team. He used to train daily but has now turned to coaching and finds time for practice once a week.

At the moment, these competitions tend to have an aesthetic slant, almost like ballet, and the team's form is judged by a panel. From an amusement point of view, we are starting to see different forms of competitive amusement take hold. Games are in the works where, for example, there are buttons that players have to hit, when it changes to their team's colour, as many times as possible.

The next step, Ward said, is to get the sport into the Olympics and with breakdancing having just been proposed as a competition for the event's 2024 instalment in Paris, France, it doesn't seem like the most unlikely outcome. With one more competition available for the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles, US, the community is hopeful.

The sporting element is further strengthened by an element iFly borrowed from the idea of



Manu Ars, a bodyflight competitor, training with his team

belts in martial arts, called wings. As players progress they earn different coloured wings. Starting at white wings, for which flyers need to demonstrate basic stable flying, they progress through yellow, blue, green, purple and red wings.

For casual customers, a standard experience, from start to finish, takes about an hour and a half. iFly provides all the specialist equipment and recommends customers wear trainers, trousers and a T-shirt, rather than a collar. "There is a lot of talk going on all the time to make sure the customer knows what is going on and that they understand the signals. The class as a group then goes into the tunnel for a 30-minute session. A class is normally about 12 people," said Ward.

Customers will each have two flights, with one flight being equivalent to three sky dives. During the time in between sessions the customer can see how their flight performed and they can have another go to try and improve upon it.

"It's a huge bonding experience. It's not a fearful thing like an actual skydive, but people can be genuinely worried about trying something like this," he said.

In an effort to expand the falling-through-

the-air experience, iFly has partnered with the paragliding simulation company Frontgrid. Most recently, Frontgrid has installed in iFly's Basingstoke site, in southern UK.

Claire Hughes, head of communications for Frontgrid, said: "When people come into the building to do indoor skydiving and are in that kind of mindset to be falling through the air, a paragliding attraction can be a great source of additional income."

The British Army's freefall parachute regiment display team, the Red Devils, arrived at the site to try the amusement out.

Frontgrid's CEO, Matt Wells, said: "We're really grateful to the British Army's Red Devils freefall parachute display team for giving up their time to come and fly ParadröVR. It was great fun to see the guys competing against each other and trying to beat the high score."

"As the world's largest indoor skydiving company, it's been great to work with the team at iFly and hear the positive feedback from guests. We know from discussions with other leisure operators that there's growing demand for immersive attractions which offer an active, skill-based experience that encourages repeat play."

iFly Basingstoke's general manager, Tracy Goffin, said: "We've been delighted with the feedback from customers since launching ParadröVR at our centre. Now visitors can not only try their hand at indoor skydiving but also experience the sensation and freedom of paragliding - all under one roof. From nine-year-old kids to professional canopy flyers - they love the realistic flying experience and the skill-based game offers another layer of fun and competition."

"As an operator, the spectator experience offered by ParadröVR is a big part of the appeal. As soon as visitors see guests on the ride, they want to have a go themselves."

As a growing sport that piggybacks one of humanity's deepest desires it is one to consider if you have \$10m lying around, particularly if the experience gets adopted as an Olympic sport - it could be time to invest before the sector really takes flight.



A freestyle competitor

Taxation and desperation

Further tax on gaming machines is threatening the Italian industry's very existence, writes *Gioco News* editor **Alessio Crisantemi**

TALY has had yet another tax imposed upon its AWP sector. It barely had time to adjust to the last increase and another has been piled on, causing operators to struggle to understand how they can make their businesses profitable.

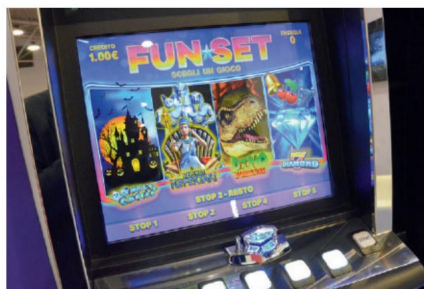
In the general confusion and the growing concern of industry insiders, after the dignity decree last summer and the financial measures employed the end of 2018, the latest announcement has operators throughout the country questioning the future viability of their sites.

It's a paradoxical situation, as it was generated by a government that said it wanted to remove gambling but has based all its future projects on the sector, such as the basic income or pension reform, in addition to the mortgage on the future plan agreed with the European Commission.

The latest twist comes with the publication of the government's "big decree" calling for new funds from gaming. This has caused the financial measures on VLTs to go up from 1.35 per cent to two per cent.

Just when the sector had already prepared to restart the production, on the basis of the new payout requiring the replacement of all the machines currently in circulation, this new setback arrives turning the tables again. But beyond the economic issues, what most frightens industry professionals is the total lack of perspective and insight provided by the government, evident from the legislative overlapping and the excessive taxation.

If there are to be further increases in tax due to this law it needs "to be issued by decree of the



Minister of Economy and Finance within 60 days from the date of entry into force of this law," according to Italy's government.

So, a new generation of AWP's will need to be created to adhere to these latest peculiarities, which are in all likelihood impending, but their nature is no clearer for that fact. Reading the law, this may mean forcing operators to replace current devices with those with a lower payout - due to the unsustainability of the new levy - and then impose a further substitution in the next few months, with a new generation of games, without granting the slightest opportunity to amortise those investments.

In all probability, this new generation of devices will have to include the health insurance card reader for the verification of the age of the players, that the dignity decree has made compulsory starting from January 1, 2020. The

most troubling possibility of these provisions is the all-too-possible contingency that tax gets raised yet again.

This looks set to be the case with Italy's deputy prime minister, Luigi Di Maio, being particularly assiduous in his mission to "free citizens from gambling."

This is, again, a contradiction; if this sector is to fail, it is the government first and foremost that will have to pay the price. Then, of course, the citizens would suffer by being deprived of this amusement and a weaker economy.

How would it be if the operators of the supply chain, exhausted by taxation, were to strike, taking to the streets and let the government know that enough is enough?

This has obviously not happened yet but may well be the only alternative left to the industry. It's do or die time.

InterGame MIDDLE EAST

SPECIAL ISSUE



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On the upward curve

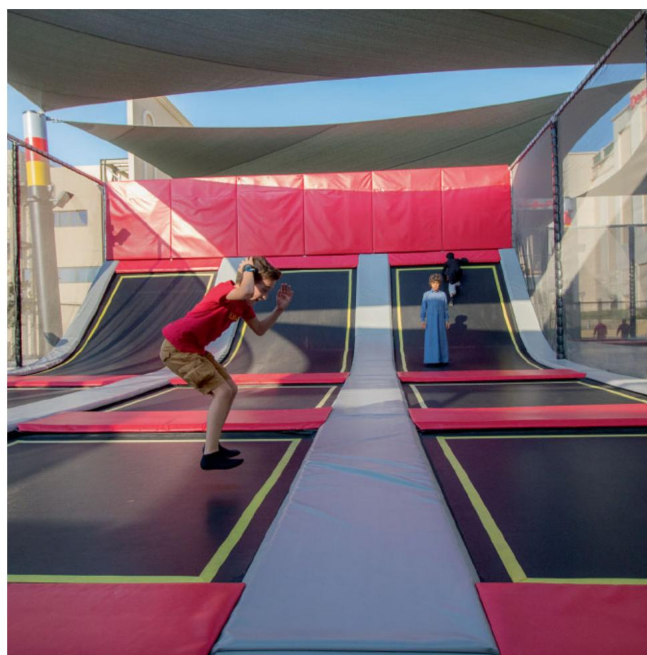
If March's comment focused on the "blip" of 2018, then this considers what is to come.

And, if said blip still resulted in profits being turned, one can only wonder at what 2019 has in store.

It is believed by most in the know here that the curve will once again turn upward. With that resurgent UAE, flanked by the flourishing Oman and neighbouring states, growth in North Africa and Asia, not to mention the juggernaut of promise that is Saudi, should prove good fortune for most.

The remainder of the contributors in this second regional round up will show just what they can bring to the table and how they will impact.

Dan Snook



Watch North Africa for prospects

Amid the clamour for opportunity in Saudi Arabia, North Africa quietly makes steady progress



It isn't just "hype" as the prospects of sanctions on Iran being lifted were a couple of years ago; the talk is all about Saudi Arabia this year and with good cause, as we outlined last month in part one of this Middle East Special Issue.

Almost every week there is another big announcement from the Saudi General Entertainment Authority, the official government purseholder of the many billions of dollars in potential investment money for leisure and entertainment projects across the country to attract tourism and enliven its 33 million inhabitants.

While the rest of the Middle East counts the cost of a downturn in revenues at FECs - for the first time in years - Saudi is ramping up its act. This isn't to say there isn't opportunity at all in the UAE, while to some it appears to have reached saturation point for amusement parks and traditional FECs, the intense competition for the swipe card dirham is keeping operators on their toes with refurbishments, making sure they have the latest games and rides to stay ahead of the competition.

Then there's the "experience" niche that is perhaps the only other relatively untapped market there. Concepts like Landmark's Jumble, VR and inflatable parks are proving successful too. Saudi Arabia however, isn't the only fresh prospect out there.

The Dubai DEAL show, opening as this April issue arrives at its entrances, attracts investors,

operators and entertainment entrepreneurs from a very wide area - not just the Gulf. This month we look further along the North African coast, beyond Egypt - now a hotbed of FEC development.

Libya, of course, was another of those short-lived hypes, but it may be years away from any reasonable opportunities of expansion. Beyond that, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria are not to be discounted.

Around now a big new FEC will open in the Mall of Sousse, Tunisia, put together by Play Mart, the European offshoot of iPlayCo in the US and a specialist in turnkey FECs. It will include a four-level playground, a toddler soft play area, Air Trek high ropes course and trampolines, plus all of the expected coin-op and small rides, all tied together with an Intercard system.

It is by no means the first in that region by the company - it put in Dream Games, Setif, Algeria, as far back as 2014. Alexandre Ramos, European sales director at Play Mart, said: "It isn't just us. There are a number of FEC locations opening in those northern African countries, most of them in the classic fashion, as anchors for retail. We have signed a contract for another big development in Tunisia and we are working on a big one for Morocco for the end of the year."

Ramos said that those three countries in particular were open for investment in the entertainment sector, as they had been underserved for years. "And it isn't just for tourists; it is probably 50-50 with locals in each



case. There are no disadvantages - everything, ticket redemption included, is permissible in those countries and I can see a lot of development going on there."

But North Africa, even with Egypt, is not going to be "another Dubai or Saudi." The financial infrastructure isn't there in the same way, but it will be a significant destination for investment.

Locations will be dwarfed by Saudi Arabia, if everything that is promised there actually happens, and so far it has. In development for some time has been Neom City, the bedrock of the Saudi "liberation" movement. Planning to get

into the tourist market and rival Dubai - and keep Saudis at home - the Saudi royals have come up with a gigantic project that will cost \$500bn.

The idea, in brief, is to create a new region up in the north-west of the country, closer to the tourist hubs of the Middle East and boasting a temperate climate. A new airport will go in as part of the plan, most of which is being funded by the Saudi government with the rest from private enterprise. It is projected to rival anything that Dubai has got, from five-star hotels and resorts to white sandy beaches, from entertainment and retail to residential towers, parks and attractions. And what about the tourist-discouraging aspects of Saudi culture? Would women have to don the abaya on the beach? What about a glass of wine with dinner? The answer is apparently, yes; these factors can be accounted for by making Neom a special economic zone. Anything that Dubai can do, Neom can do...

It all looked well on course, though some recent events have delayed the late-2018 start until, most likely, late 2020-early 2021, leaving some to despair that the Neom project would survive.

It may be delayed but the general feeling in the region is that it will still happen as it is an integral part in the Crown Prince's Vision 2030 programme, which is aimed at providing enough entertainment and freedom to the average Saudi citizen that they abandon thoughts of leaving the country for holidays, while at the same time attracting foreign tourists.

The impact on international tourism will be profound, assuming that Neom turns out to be everything that is being proposed.

There was a time when Doha, in Qatar, threatened to shake Dubai's supremacy, but that has been stalled, partially through a political fall-out with its neighbours. Abu Dhabi, the UAE capital and the real powerhouse in the country, has also its own claims through major projects ranging from Ferrari World to Yas Island but it still doesn't have the "glamour" of its neighbour.

With the apparently unlimited resources of Saudi, however, a blank canvas and a location with geophysical characteristics that lend themselves to such a project, the next 10 years are going to be fascinating.

Even without Neom, all of the talk, all of the focus and all of the energy in the region's entertainment sector is being channelled towards Saudi Arabia. Recent statistics coming out of the country suggest that as many as 500 foreign companies engaged in the wider leisure and entertainment field have already been registered in Saudi in the past 12 months. That may be the tip of the iceberg.

They are looking at cinemas, amusement parks, FECs and everything even loosely connected with entertainment, such as sports stadia, F1 motor racing circuits or live concert venues. Yet the pattern of entertainment that is already emerging from the authority set into place to oversee this growth in amusement, the General Entertainment Authority. Under its governance a welter of cultural, but transient, entertainments has already taken place. They have taken the form of substantial but temporary "festivals" in towns and cities across the region.

With the amusement industry more attuned to long-term investment in fixed-point venues, this is taking the industry a little off-balance. Literally hundreds of these festivals are taking place and given the international community pause for thought about how they might take advantage of it.

One early observer of the phenomenon is Jack Cook, president of Bob's Space Racers, a company that is almost uniquely positioned in terms of its product sector, producing large-scale, multiplayer carnival-type group games. The point is that the BSR games are equally adept at adjusting to transporting, as the US carnivals they are initially designed for are transient in nature.

In his company's profile this month, Cook said: "While the attention has been on movie theatres and new parks opening, the greatest opportunity for amusements may be in the festival operations. These see many more people in a shorter timeframe than a permanent location. If you compare it to the US carnivals and where they are today, if the festivals have longevity and good organisations promoting them, they will be a high revenue producing part of the entertainment sector."

He added: "The festival sector, like the carnivals industry, is not an easy environment in which to operate, so it is not going to be a business that everyone will like to take part in. The portability of the amusements and the costs and logistics associated, will be the biggest challenge to produce a quality product."

If he is right, then the international community needs to address itself to the prospect of radically altering its business model, or risk missing out on what could be a very lucrative sector. The template is already there, not just in the US carnivals or the travelling fairgrounds of Europe, but also in that prime example of high-volume but temporary entertainment, Dubai's Global Village. That venue is only open during certain periods of the year, albeit on a permanent showground, but the ability of the content to move in and out very readily suggests that the principal can be adapted.

And, of course, it isn't all about Saudi alone; the attention is all upon it though and

it is the country with all the credentials for rapid expansion.

Some of the big players, however, are not taking their eye off the international ball. Big Saudi operators like Al Hokair and Al Othaim are not putting up the barricades to fight off the predators circling their territory. On the contrary, they appear to be relishing the pending contest and are continuing their own programmes of expansion into the surrounding region. Both companies have aspirations as far afield as India in the east and Tunisia in the west. Some of the operators, notably in the UAE, have privately expressed some frustration that the opportunities in Saudi are being blunted by the stranglehold that the major operators have over the mall developers there. Indeed, Al Othaim actually builds its own malls and is therefore hardly likely to welcome any other FEC operator into its locations when it has its own operating division.

In the wider market, it is going to be interesting to see what companies like Landmark will do, not just in Saudi but in other territories. It has its own substantial operation in India, for example, and may well view that as just as primary a target for further expansion even than Saudi. And one might describe Emaar as a sleeping giant, having huge retail outlets of its own but until recently only a taste of in-house entertainment offerings. That is almost certainly going to change within a year or two.

In other countries the projects continue to be announced; whether they will come to fruition will depend on a number of factors. Bahrain has proposed a new underwater amusement park with a sunken Boeing 747 as its central attraction, for example. Kuwait has a number of projects under consideration, and so does Oman - about to have its first real snow experience. Egypt, now that political uncertainties appear to have subsided, has renewed interest from the big investors, and south into other parts of Africa seem a natural expansion for the Middle East operators.

It isn't all about Saudi, by any means. But Saudi will certainly focus the attention for the next few years.



The plan for 2019 outlined

Biggest year of expansion yet for Al Othaim

WITH one opening safely under his belt for 2019 and three more scheduled for this month, Mohammad Attia, general manager at Al Othaim Leisure and Tourism Company, has the rest of his year clearly mapped out.

As many as six openings are planned for July, with three more in August, two in September, two in October and another five before the end of the year. It will be the biggest year of expansion that the entertainment segment of the big Saudi group has experienced.

Much of that responsibility lies with Attia, as the “business development” responsibilities in his remit will suggest.

Those openings will be across all of the many brands that have been developed by the Al Othaim team over the past few years. It has resolved itself into a pattern. The anchor FEC brand, so well known in Saudi Arabia, is Safforiland, but that stays in that country. It’s “exportable” equivalent is now the established Fabyland. Almost as well known are the teenage thrill outlets of Xtreme Zone and the children’s adult play venue, My Town, plus the real snow experience, Snow City. And this year another new brand will be added, Mattel, obviously in partnership with the famous toy maker. Always on the lookout for new concepts in this fiercely innovation-centric FEC sector, Al Othaim will also launch its own entry into the field of virtual reality soon.

“Our VR concept will open at the Mall of Qatar,” said Attia. “We believe that the

technology is now right and used selectively it is now a commercial proposition. What is always key to FEC operators in the Middle East is that they have the very latest that technology will provide and a variety of themes that will ensure that the players return time and again. We now think that this is the right time to embark on this sector.”

The Al Othaim entry will be named Virtu and is scheduled to open at the Mall of Qatar in July.

The Saudi Vision 2030 project will see literally hundreds of non-Saudi companies setting up in the country to take advantage of the new opportunities there as cultural conservatism is relaxed and entertainment is encouraged.

Many operators from other countries are going to move into Saudi Arabia, just as the movie theatre majors are now doing, but this won’t prevent the long-term plans for Al Othaim to expand laterally, said Attia. “We continue to be focused on expanding throughout the GCC region. Saudi is our home market and we have a team working on fresh openings there, but we will also expand at every opportunity in the UAE and Qatar, and we will open our first Oman location in the Mall of Muscat this year.”

Oman, the UAE, Qatar...and Al Othaim is already established in Egypt. Beyond that? “All of these countries will continue to feature in our expansion plans and, of course, Oman is a fresh territory this year. But we are also in talks with developers in Bahrain, Tunisia and Kuwait. And we are looking to enter India. That is a massive market by itself and we will do so in conjunction



with a partner. We will release more detail on that later in the year.”

The Al Othaim entertainment concepts have the advantage of internal expansion because the parent group is itself a major developer of retail shopping malls in Saudi, each of which traditionally has an FEC anchor. This practice will continue, said Attia, but he revealed that the company has stepped up its act to become more aggressive and go beyond in-house developments.

“We will certainly be present in malls that are now owned by the group. At the moment we are not looking at the stand-alone concept of FEC ‘destination.’ We are taking another route, to have multiple entertainment options within the same premises. For example, we have My Town that usually is located side-by-side with Fabyland or, in the case of Saudi venues, with Safforiland. We are also launching Xtreme Zone alongside other brands in the same premises. The object is to attract different age groups, but primarily teenagers as we have identified a demand there. With the introduction of Mattel, we will offer multiple avenues of entertainment for our guests within the same mall.”

Today, the Al Othaim group operates 25 FECs under the different brand portfolios, but the group in general and Attia personally have made no secret of the desire to see this number accelerate rapidly. In this year alone that number is going to virtually double. It illustrates the forthright nature of the Al Othaim group’s desire to drive its business forward across not only the Middle East but well beyond.



Xtreme Zone at Deerfields Mall



Garden Area, Deerfields Mall, Abu Dhabi
www.xtremezoneme.com    XtremezoneME





A quality experience begins with design

Mastering location appeal is key

FOR Kareem Elgeindy it is all about customer experience.

The Al Othaim group development manager, who works side-by-side with Mohammad Attia, has to ensure that with each fresh opening by the group the right level of quality experience is delivered every time.

"We have to constantly work on enhancing the offer in terms of appeal," he said. "And not just the aesthetics. The overall look of the locations has to be right, of course, but it is the *feel* of the location for the visitors that must be centric to everything that we do."

He takes part in the planning, design and implementation of every location. No two look the same, even though the brand name might be the same and the content largely matching. The company improvises as the locality demands, with subtle amendments in design, the use of colour and theming, the content in terms of choice of rides and the layout of the games.

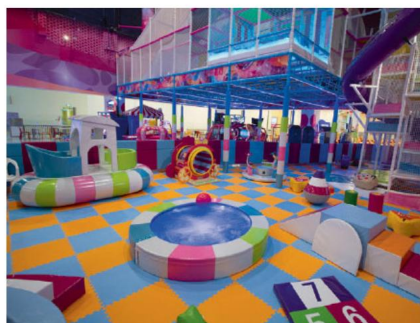
Elgeindy had a big year in 2018, seeing four more openings delivered on time. Two of them were in Saudi, a Fabyland at Tabuk Park in May, and another at West Avenue, Dammam, at the end of the year. Then there were two outside of Saudi, an Xtreme Zone in Deerfield Mall, Abu Dhabi, UAE, in January, and a Fabyland at Dragon Mart in Dubai.

In each case, he said, the development team looked at what might be done to make the location different, while at the same time keeping to the parameters developed into the brand name. "We are always looking to see what of the latest technology we might install in the

new venue. We try to inject into them all of the latest that can be found in the marketplace and upgrade constantly our services. For example, we have now worked hard on introducing digital displays into our locations and it is working well."

Elgeindy is a leading member of the team that conducted the major overhaul and rebranding of the traditional anchor product of the Saudi market for Al Othaim, its Safforiland. That work was undertaken through 2017 and 2018 and the programme is now complete to the satisfaction of the Al Othaim team, not to mention, judging from their response, the brand's customers. All of the other brands in the group are comparatively new: Fabyland, My Town, Xtreme Land, Xtreme Zone, Splash waterpark, Snow City, so while they are kept constantly under critical review there are no plans for further rebranding this year, he said.

Instead the team will be looking to add new brands. The new virtual reality park, the first in the Al Othaim portfolio, is Virtu and it is set to open at the Mall of Qatar in July of this year.



And, of course, there are two completely fresh openings to come for the Mattel partnership, the first of which will be in August.

Elgeindy is a keen advocate of the "anything new" policy, but strictly on the understanding that it has been carefully evaluated as a commercial proposition in the first place. "VR, for example, is a product that is now ready for some expansion, but it will never replace the traditional entertainment and the edutainment elements in FECs. It will hopefully prove to be an asset that will provide an extra layer of attraction that will draw in a fresh strata of visitors into our locations."

It is all part of a well-developed process at Al Othaim. As Elgeindy described it: "For the design elements of our locations, we regularly consult with our design department and with our suppliers to make sure that we have the best-finished product. The rides and attractions we install are often specially created for that specific location or brand. That was very much the theme of the rebranding at Safforiland to give it a more modern look and feel.

"As we develop and open new projects, so we are injecting into them fresh ideas in layout and design. The use of digital displays, in conjunction with the rides and attractions that we are now employing, is a good example of what can be done to make the attraction even more appealing."

It is going to be a very heavy year of development for Elgeindy and his colleagues with over 20 openings planned. Even so, they are working on concepts for fresh openings, fresh brands and fresh territories well beyond 2019.



The opening of the new Fabyland at Dragon Mart 2 in Dubai

A huge year for Al Othaim

Around 20 new venues set to open

THE first of as many as 20 new venues planned across the Middle East was opened by Al Othaim Leisure last month in Dubai's Dragon Mart 2.

The new FEC, one of the Fabyland brand, may have already been supplemented by as many as three more locations that were due to be unveiled this month.

An Xtreme Zone was scheduled for Abu Dhabi, and another Fabyland plus an Xtreme Zone were both set to be opened in the Mall of Muscat, Oman, at the time of writing.

It is all part of a major drive by Al Othaim to increase its influence across the region this year.

The Dragon Mart 2 installation has the traditional Fabyland content of rides and games and represents Al Othaim's third Fabyland facility in the UAE.

Dragon Mart 2 is the sister mall of Dragon Mart, the world's largest Chinese trading hub outside of mainland China, and contains

shopping, dining and entertainment. It has more than 1,000 shops and kiosks in 1.4m sq.ft of retail space.

Said Mohammad Attia, general manager at Al Othaim Leisure: "We are excited to launch Fabyland at Dragon Mart 2. The state-of-the-art family entertainment centre covers an expansive 14,000sq.ft of space, and brings non-stop indoor entertainment for children of all age groups - fun-filled rides, action-packed gaming arcades and intriguing novelty machines with rewards for every level of skill.

"Our vision is to offer an experience of leisure combined with fitness and recreational options to families. We have set-up a 'futuristic' ambience at the facility featuring a wide range of thrilling rides and attractions for all age groups. We are also bringing My Town, a new concept that provides entertainment along with physical activities for toddlers, children, teenagers and adults."



The other two Fabyland locations in the UAE are at Deerfields Mall in Abu Dhabi (opened in 2015) and at Dubai Festival City (2016). Dragon Mart 2 includes several major rides, trampolines and a three-level soft play structure.

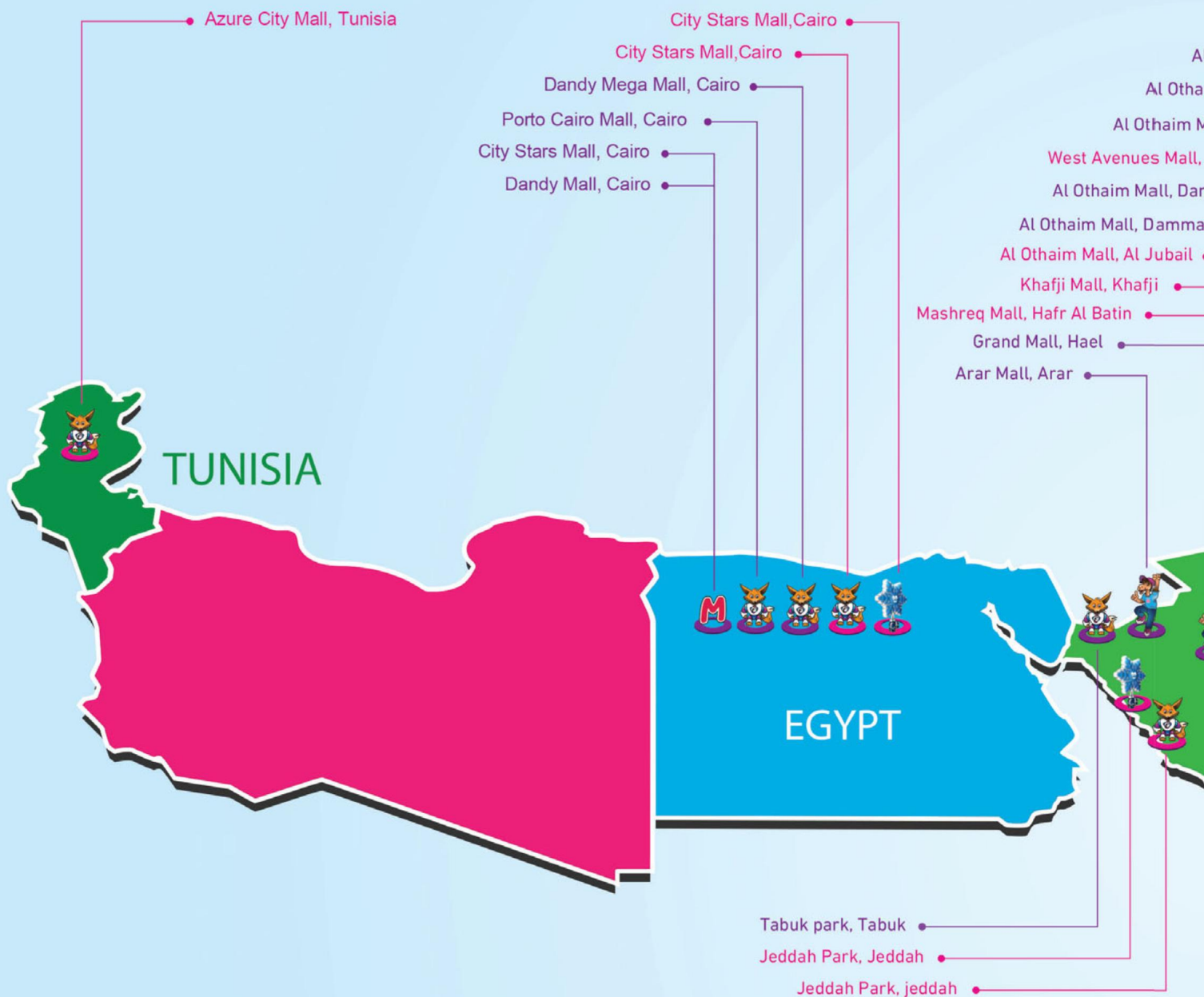
The locations map on P50 graphically illustrates Al Othaim's ambitions for this year. It shows 25 locations currently, with future venues numbering 27, most of which will open in 2019. They indicate fresh locations in Bahrain, Qatar, several across the UAE including Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah and Ajman, and five in Oman. New locations in Saudi Arabia include Dammam, Jeddah, Al Jubail, Khaliji and Hair Al Batin. In Egypt, there are proposed openings in Cairo and further afield there is one set for Azure City Mall in Tunisia.

The confirmed opening dates at the time of writing, apart from the three for March, include Oman and two in Dubai in July, Muscat and two in Qatar also in July, three in Abu Dhabi in August, two in Dubai in September, two in Qatar in October, and Bahrain, two in Jeddah, Cairo and one in Saudi in the final quarter of the year.

The brands are a mix of Fabyland, Xtreme Zone, My Town, Xtremeland, Snow City, Safforiland and the two new concepts, the VR FEC Virtu in July and the Mattel park in August.

It all adds up to a huge year of expansion for the group's leisure subsidiary and one in which two new brands will be added to the seven that the company is already making a familiar sight in Middle East towns and cities.





fabyland

مدينة الثلج
SNOWCITY

Safföri Land



Splash
Water Park



Twenty years on

This year, ASI completes 20 years in the MENA leisure industry. **InterGame** caught up with its CEO, Prakash Vivekanand, to discuss the company's journey over the last 20 years and his plans for the future



Prakash Vivekanand, CEO, ASI

WHEN it comes to the MENA region, one company name that always crops up is Amusement Services International, one of the region's foremost service providers for the FEC business. It is led by Prakash Vivekanand, whose years of experience enable him to understand every facet of the leisure business and its operations.

InterGame: Since ASI's inception in 1999, the company has expanded annually. This year, as ASI celebrates its 20th anniversary, what thoughts and emotions come to mind?

Vivekanand: "This has been a brilliant journey for us thus far. We started with an aim of becoming a quality distributor that will add value for both operators and manufacturers. We believe we have achieved that. Through this journey, we have built lasting and wonderful relationships with operators and manufacturers around the world. Looking back, we feel very proud of our achievements in the industry."

From a small unit of three employees to now becoming one of the leading distributors of amusement products in the MENA region, as the CEO, how has the journey been for both you and ASI?

"We started as an equipment distribution company with two product lines, Sega and Bay Tek. Our initial team comprised multi-taskers who could do everything from selling products

to logistics and accounts. We were hands on and put in a lot of hard work - 12/7. The MENA was on the cusp of developing into a prominent FEC market. We chose our product lines wisely and ensured that we complemented rather than competed with our own line-up of products. Our principals encouraged our efforts and our success helped us gain new product lines.

"Our commitment to providing the best service levels won us customers. Soon we were equipping the best operations across the region with a product line-up that took care of all their requirements. Besides Sega and Bay Tek, who we still represent, we added many other brands from Coastal Amusements, Bob's Space Racers, LAI, Triotech, Elaut, Cogan Rides, Sting International, Falgas, BANDAI NAMCO, Intercard, Benchmark Games, VRsenal, Jennison Entertainment and Billares SAM.

"Today, the ASI family comprises 55 wonderful individuals who are integral to our success. More than 50 per cent of the team has been with the group for 10 or more years. This team has been the real star of our success story. They have shared my vision to deliver excellence to our customers and I am indeed proud to be leading them."

What do you see as ASI's biggest accomplishment since its inception?

"Our knowledge of the business and our ability to understand the needs of a customer, their

market, their location and cater to them has contributed to our success. Over 80 per cent of the operations to which we have offered our products and services, continue to thrive and earn revenue. To be able to contribute to their continued success is possibly one of our most notable accomplishments. There have been many others.

"ASI enjoys a repeat business ratio of over 98 per cent. This is a big statistic for us. If we did not deliver what we promised, our customers would not be coming back to us. When we first started, we benchmarked ourselves against a leading distribution company in the west. Today, our business model has emerged as a benchmark for others to emulate. There are many who follow what we do from our business model to our support services - brochures, websites, social posts and even exhibition stand designs. We are humbled and flattered by their following. They do so because we are good at what we do. This inspires us to set our standards higher and create new benchmarks."

How have the three divisions of ASI Machine Sales, ASI Design Solutions and ASI Support Solutions evolved over the years and how does one entity help the other?

"They all go hand in hand. We think a project needs to be well designed, have great equipment and be well operated to succeed. Hence we added design and operation wings to support our clients from project planning, layout, interior fit-out, equipment, pre-opening and assisting them with their ongoing operations. These three divisions sit under the same roof in Dubai and are involved in a project from the concept stage itself. We have today executed over 80 projects all across the Middle East, Africa, east Europe and the Indian sub-continent."

You are one of the founding members of MENALAC, bringing together leisure and entertainment industry professionals under one roof to create this not-for-profit trade organisation. How did this come about?

"The industry in the region has given me all the recognition I have. I always wanted to contribute to its development. A few like-minded professionals in the MENA amusement industry met on a flight back from IAAPA in Orlando and discussed the need to come together as



The ASI team at DEAL

an industry and support the growth of our business in the MENA region, as well as liaise with the authorities as an industry. We were all determined to make this happen. In the ensuing days, we received overwhelming support from many of the leading players in the region and MENALAC became a reality.

"Today, MENALAC is a recognised and registered trade body that genuinely adds value to the MENA industry with educational and safety initiatives that are tailored to suit the MENA region. I am so lucky to be involved with it and to be able to contribute to our wonderful industry."

How is the market shaping today? Will the Middle Eastern boom continue?

"Our strategy was always to be present in many markets. This helps to keep our business stable as we balance the slowdown in certain markets with growth in others. The GCC market is going through a period of stabilisation. This will continue to be our core market. These markets have a young population base that enjoys their FECs. Many countries in the Middle East will offer substantial opportunities as the geopolitical situation settles. I am very upbeat about this region."

What are you showcasing at DEAL 2019? How upbeat are you with your product line-up?

"Very excited. This will possibly be our best line-up of products in the last five years. From dedicated VR arcade cabinets to VR mazes, arcade, redemption, novelty and carnival attractions, we will have 100 units spread across our 7,500sq.ft pavilion. Beat Saber VR, House of the Dead: Scarlet Dawn, Connect 4 Hoops, Super Bikes 3, ATV Slam, Hang Time from BSR, Virtual Rabbids, Assassin's Creed VR, Pixel Chase, Flintstones Quarry Quest, The Big Rocket Ride, Super Kixx Pro, a new feature to the Cosmic XL - we have so many. It will take our customers a good three to four hours to play the entire product range on the ASI Pavilion. We thank all our manufacturing partners for this exciting line-up."

Is VR here to stay? What's your take? Will these take over traditional arcade games?

"VR is a great add-on to any FEC. It will help us



Carinos in Iran

attract the millennials and generation Z players who are always on the lookout for something novel. However, I don't think VR will replace traditional games within the FEC. VR is still evolving and there are many challenges to overcome in adapting a VR game for FECs/LBEs.

"Not all VR game manufacturers understand the needs of an FEC/LBE. We work closely with game developers as well as companies such as HTC Vive to enable them to understand the specific needs of operators. The HMD, the cables, the need for an operator, limited capacity (in some cases) and, most importantly, the attractiveness of the game cabinet to draw a player are all challenges to overcome.

"Virtual Rabbids: The Big Ride from LAI is a game that ticks most of the boxes and is therefore extremely successful in every FEC. We think the Beat Saber VR from VRsenal will be very big too, as it addresses all the needs of the operator and the player. Operators will need to select their VR gear and the supplier carefully. If not, they could often end up with a technical nightmare. As newer forms of HMDs and mixed reality options come into the market, we will see a total disruption in the way people play their games. This is a very exciting period."

On a personal note, who has inspired you to have the work ethic that you do?

"Wow. So many, I can't really name one. I continually seek inspiration and I have been extremely lucky enough to cross paths with

many such wonderful people and exchange information. Many of these initial acquaintances are now close friends as well as customers or associates. We are a family now. They have shaped my work ethics and the core competencies at ASI. My learning has never stopped. I keep absorbing information from all around and apply the same to grow our business and our industry in my own way."

What is the best piece of leadership advice you have received?

"Probably the one that I received from my dad; stay grounded and value your relationships across all spheres. These qualities are critical for your success."



ASI staff at the IAAPSI show in Mumbai, India, last month. Mark Lense from Bay Tek (left) with Rosanne Fernandes and Tawqeer Qureshi from ASI



A Tridom FEC concept for India

Jumble - an adventure in crazy challenges

New FEC brand set to make its mark

HAVING given no more than a taster of Landmark Leisure's intentions with its Middle East operation last month, more attention can now be given to its award-winning innovation that is simply named Jumble.

Landmark believe it has hit a weak spot in the age groupings for available attractions and entertainment in the region with this new brand. And so confident is the company of its potential that Jumble is to be made available as a franchise brand.

Silvio Liedtke, CEO at Landmark Leisure, having noted the relative downturn in the FECs market in 2018, yet convinced that it is merely an adjustment in the pattern of development, confirmed in March's Part I of this Special Issue that he would not be expanding his Fun City/Fun Block/FunVille/Fun Works/Tridom empire horizontally in the region in 2019. One suspects that Liedtke had some inkling of the coming downturn in our March 2018 issue, when he asserted that no more Fun City locations would open in the foreseeable future.

He was not referring to his group's 23-location operation in India, as we outlined last month; that business is proceeding apace. Was there nothing for the "local" market, then? The Gulf states or the wider Middle East?

Jumble, very much so, and underlined when it won an award in the first of the trade association MENALAC's annual "Oscars."

"We got that award in early April," said Liedtke, "yet the first Jumble only opened in the UAE the previous December, barely four months earlier. It was a brand developed entirely in-house... the overall scheme, the branding, the



technology. A huge resource was given in terms of time and energy by a brilliant team of very creative young people. We are immensely proud of what they have achieved.

"Now they will take pleasure - and the credit - when Jumble is franchised into a number of countries. We have had a huge number of enquiries. By the time your April issue reaches the DEAL show late in March, we should be in a position to report on all of the franchise contracts that have been signed off."

Said colleague Kunal Harisinghani, Landmark's head of marketing and technology and a considerable enthusiast for Jumble: "It is all very exciting because it is something that genuinely addresses the need to target a demographic that no-one previously specifically catered to. All of the current brands - Landmark's too - are aimed at the under 18s. With Jumble it is 12+ and the core audience is now being shown as late teens to under 35s.

"It is a truly unique product in terms of the offering and targeted demographic. Yes, we'll take it to India too in due course, where we plan a big expansion of our existing operation as Silvio outlined last month. We are launching Tridom there this year and India will provide the majority of our growth over the next couple of years. It is a vast and, as it is turning out, a very strategic market."

But back to the Middle East, Harisinghani said: "There is a need for us to move into different offerings that aren't rides and aren't coin-op games. We needed more ideas that could be built on, say, our Fun Block concept that promotes active play, with soft play, climbing walls and trampolines, and with a small number of redemption games and a café. That is rather different from anything else we had previously done and they are working well with three venues so far in Dubai."

Liedtke took up the story: "So any growth within the UAE might be expected to come from locations such as Fun Block and now the expansion on that theme, Jumble. There's little or nothing like it in the region. Even with Fun Block we had not evolved that much beyond the standard FEC and we wanted to blur the lines still more, and that led to Jumble."

What is Jumble? It is a maze of crazy challenges. Some people have compared it to Crystal Maze as a style of attraction and the one-time popular TV game does go some way to explaining Jumble quickly and easily. But it is actually rather more than that. There are physical, mental, skill and mystery challenges but instead of being a set of challenges for an individual performing each task, the guests have



to form themselves into a team.

Any number of players between three and six can make up a team. They enter a set of rooms, each of which contains a challenge and it is markedly different from the challenge in the next room. "It is not an escape room," said Harisinghani, "with one room at a time over about 60 minutes. Jumble is a large number of rooms where if you fail on any of them you have to start again from the beginning."

"In fact there are several Jumbles across the facility and each one is themed similarly, towards skill or mental challenges. A Jumble is a collection of challenging rooms of any number, three, six, eight, 100, 200..."

It appears to have had a great response from all demographics, teens to corporate. It is a stand-alone site, not within a mall, so the mechanics to drive footfall are very different; weekdays are schools and corporates, whereas weekends it is more familiars and walk-ins - a straight 50-50, in fact.

"It is completely automated," said Liedtke. "Each room resets itself so there is minimal staffing. We have spent a lot of time, energy and research on getting the automation right. We went through a very considerable learning curve for two years before we opened."

Liedtke said that by the time of DEAL he expected Jumble to be franchised into another GCC country. "We'll get a couple of sites up and running to see how the model is working as it is still a new concept. From then on, once it proves a viable business for us and for the franchisees, we will expand exponentially."

He said that Jumble could be built into malls and that there are several different designs already completed. The plans will apply to areas of up to 15,000sq.ft inside malls, but the company is working on smaller models too, so that there could be multiple sites in a city rather than one large one.

"In the case of more than one Jumble in one city, we would plan different content for each one. We have content ideas for literally hundreds of rooms and that gives the opportunity for multi-sites and the ability to refresh existing ones, ensuring continued repeat visits."

Liedtke reflected: "I was speaking at the MAPIC conference last year and suggested to the audience that our industry has become very 'big-eyed.' Operators only want the best licences, the largest venues and sometimes those priorities do draw the crowds, but the focus is very rarely on what will encourage repeat visits and that is vital to anyone running community malls or catering for small populations."

"With Jumble, the average number of times to visit to complete all of the available challenges is eight times with four hours each time. There is very little else out there that gives the guest that kind of opportunity. And we have seen that it works. We have many customers coming to us anything up to 12 times in a year. That's what it was designed for."

It has to be challenging, however. That is the very essence of the attraction. It cannot be made too easy so that it can be regularly completed on a first visit. It has to be capable of exercising both the body and the mind, as a team effort, encouraging social skills and teamwork.



Liedtke sees it as an ideal franchising product. It is a universal theme and therefore has potential in pretty well any market. "FECs in the Middle East and in India are distinctly different from those in the rest of the world, so you cannot necessarily copy and paste your FEC brand anywhere; it will need to adapt to particular regions."

"Malls have a community feel to them in the Middle East and in India too, because generally it is too hot to be outside, so they are a hub that people use in their spare time. This is not the case in the US or Europe, for example. Here we cater to one-to-10-year-olds in FECs; in south-east Asia it is ages five or six right up to teens."

Jumble, they both emphasised, is suitable for any market. They see it as a great concept and want to grow it rapidly to become as far-reaching as possible. One year of franchising will tell them, and the world, just how to make it work properly and how it can add value for the franchisee. "Once we have done that, nothing will stop us."

Meanwhile, in other parts of the Middle East there is a marking-time situation, except for Saudi Arabia, of course, where there is rapid development, notably through the opening of the movie theatres market. "We have five stores currently in Saudi," said Liedtke, "but we may not go much further into that market, as the local operators have long since taken a stranglehold on the best sites, particularly as they are also developers, so they will naturally plan into their projects their own entertainment brands."

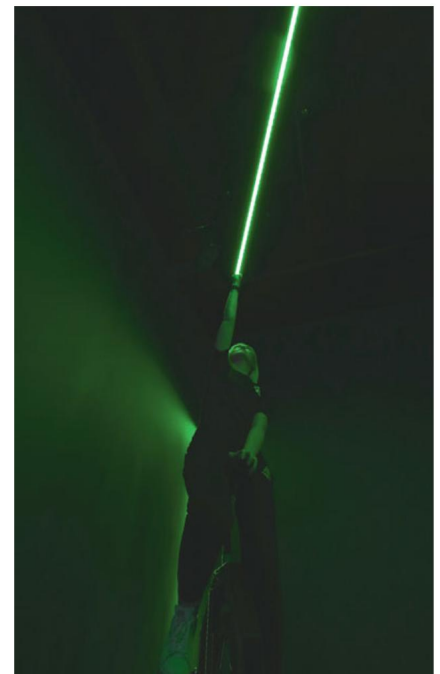
"The major Saudi cities are pretty well saturated for FECs and our stores tend to be significantly smaller, so in a sense the Saudi consumers have been almost spoiled; they are

used to large-scale venues and it is difficult to compete under those terms. However, we are still evaluating the market but I would say that right now we do not have big plans for Saudi."

And the amusement parks? A year ago Liedtke tended to consider them a "different market," so a year later?

"The UAE amusement parks are showing an increase in visitor levels, but they are still making huge losses. Originally the entry prices were about AED250 but there are plenty of offers out there that allow you to get in for half of that. Family sizes here tend to be large, so ticket prices are important and the costs are higher than many feel is right for the market."

He still, therefore, retains the view that the big amusement parks will not seriously challenge the FEC status quo - and they certainly won't challenge the incoming status of Jumble, the great prize now in place for Landmark Leisure and its own ticket to ride the international scene for the next year.



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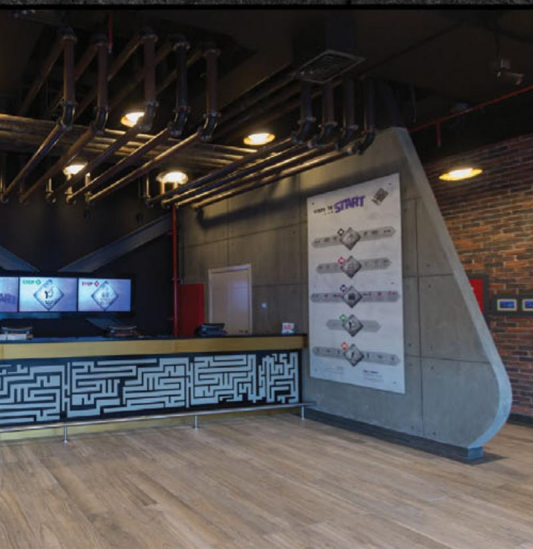


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BANDAI NAMCO Amusement Europe has been supplying products into the Middle East for the last 30 years and it is one of its key strategic markets.

Amusement Services International mainly handles the range of BN branded products and has historically handled the Super Bikes titles from Raw Thrills. It will therefore supply the upcoming Super Bikes 3 game from Raw Thrills and will also preview the DC Joker vs Batman: Laughing Madness air hockey for the first time in the region.

Warehouse of Games is distributing the rest of Raw Thrills' line in the region, as well as the DC Comics pusher products and Joker's Wild air hockey. These tested very well with customers in the Middle East and the sales figures are very impressive.

"Working in close partnership with local distributors also means that you get closer to the operators - in this case companies like Al Hokair, Al Othaim, MAF and Landmark," said Kjeld Erichsen, international business development manager at BNAE. "All of the main locations in the region are home to products we have supplied."

"We have seen a fantastic growth in the market over the years. There have been some incredible products that were particularly well suited to the region, such as Mario Kart Arcade GP and the World's Largest Pac-Man, which have helped to ensure our success."

"Warehouse of Games and Amusement Services International have supported BNAE by giving us direct customer feedback to enable us to improve product for the region," said commercial and sales director James Anderson. "This is especially useful as they make us aware of local laws, trends and traditions."

BNAE is looking forward to the upcoming DEAL show but was not ready to reveal the full details of the product line-up. "You can be sure that some of the biggest product releases from IAAPA and EAG will be at the show," Anderson said. "We can confirm that Amusement Services International will be showing the four-player Super Bikes 3 DX, the latest version of the extremely successful franchise from Raw Thrills, as well as Pac-Man Pixel Arcade - the successor of the Pac-Man Arcade Party - now with more games. These will be shown in the Middle East for the first time."

Warehouse of Games will be exhibiting Slither.io. Based on the huge app title, the three-

player ticket redemption version is currently on test in the region with major operators.

Other games that will be exhibited at DEAL include Joker vs Batman: Laughing Madness, which will be exhibited by ASI. This multiplayer air hockey game from BANDAI NAMCO follows on from the successful Pac-Man Smash, with a fast and furious multi-puck feature.

Also on their stand will be Jumbo Jumpin', another new take on a classic game, where players need to jump over an imaginary rope in order to illuminate lights and win the jackpot. Jumbo Jumpin' can be linked for even more fun.

In addition, visitors to DEAL will see Halo: Fireteam Raven in both two and four-player versions. The game, created by Raw Thrills in collaboration with Play Mechanix and 343 Industries, sees players take part in the events of the original Halo storyline from an all-new perspective.

Injustice Arcade from Raw Thrills will be shown by WoG. The heroes and villains of the DC Comics universe come head-to-head in this new card vending arcade experience by Raw Thrills. Each play vends one of 200 collectible cards featuring a DC character, which can then be used to be played in the game. Players can build a unique team of three in any combination or put characters together that have compatible abilities to unleash a devastating super attack.

Also present will be Cruis'n Blast DX, the latest in the Cruis'n series of driving games that debuted in the 90s with the arcade smash, Cruis'n USA, as well as the DC Super Heroes pusher, which will also be shown in both two and four-player versions. This closed-loop pusher with ticket payout, featuring both heroes and villains from the DC Comics archives, continues to be one of the most successful pushers on the market.

"This year, as well as supporting our distributors in the region, BNAE will take its own stand for the first time to show some of the latest developments within the virtual reality sector," said Erichsen.

Working in partnership with developer AiSolve, BNAE will show two titles - the latest WePlayVR gaming arena that has a library of



SUPERBIKES 3 Copyright 2019 Raw Thrills, Inc. All rights reserved.



software available for it. From the successful Mayan Adventure, which was the first title first to be shown, to Star Defence, a multiplayer shooter. This will be the first showing of the hit We Bare Bears, using a property from Cartoon Network - We Bare Bears Food Truck Rush. Players become the hit characters in the game and work together in a comedy food van supplying people.

Also on the stand will be the first public showing of the motion-based VR driving game, Rodent Rage. Players select their character and race through the woodland trying to get to the finish line first. This multiplayer seated VR adventure is new from AiSolve.

"We think the time is right to show VR in the Middle East; there is an increased demand for this type of product as new cinemas and bowling halls are built," said Erichsen. "In particular, we expect to see the market in Saudi Arabia grow significantly in the next few years. We also expect to see a number of visitors from the surrounding countries like Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia."

"Another market that is also increasing in size is Kuwait, where our local partner, Future Kid Entertainment, is working hard to renew their FECs," he added. "This year, we anticipate that the trends will include an increase in redemption and action-filled entertainment products, such as bowling, trampolines and climbing walls."



image © 2019 Microsoft Corporation

Correction: BNAE and Raw Thrills

IN our March Part I Middle East Special Issue, we referred to the Raw Thrills line being handled by other distributors in the Middle East. This is, of course, incorrect. The Raw Thrills line is handled in that region by BANDAI NAMCO Amusements Europe. We are happy to put the record straight and apologise to all parties.

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'A global brand, operating locally'

In the concluding part of *InterGame's* interview with Majid Al Futtaim's Cameron Mitchell, the CEO sheds light on MAF's plans for brands, UAE expansion, competition in the region and overseas growth

THE Majid Al Futtaim group is continuing its policy of accessing and licensing famous brands, under the guidance of Cameron Mitchell, its CEO.

It was already the regional holder of the American Girl brand and is now taking on the Dreamscape virtual reality concept that has recently opened in Los Angeles. There's an awful lot of influential and creative muscle involved; investors in the project include Steven Spielberg, Nickelodeon, AMC and, of course, MAF.

"It is now open in Century City and we will roll it out as well in 2019 at the Mall of the Emirates in Dubai," Mitchell said.

He wants to continue the policy of innovating that saw Majid Al Futtaim introduce Raw Thrills' and 343 Industries' arcade version of Microsoft's iconic Halo: Fireteam Raven in the Middle East, just as years ago it brought the region's first real snow experience, Ski Dubai.

While some of his competitors are entering the realms of franchising their brands to third parties, Mitchell is not keen to join them. "We need to fully focus on what we have planned... the refurbishment programme, the new Magic Planets, the new concept. If a venue or country was ripe for a Magic Planet I would want to put it in myself!

"We have 110 venues in the UAE already, so we have to concentrate on what we are running ourselves."

That does not stop Majid Al Futtaim from venturing further afield, however. Last year came news that the group was building a shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, its first African adventure outside of Egypt. The mall is open and Majid Al Futtaim has partnered the Carrefour supermarket chain (for which it has the Middle East licence) in opening there. But Mitchell said that he was not planning to venture more into Africa, except for Egypt and the existing Kenyan location, at this stage. "But Africa will become progressively more attractive."

Overall, he said, the number of shopping malls opening in the more advanced countries is doubling annually but online retail is also increasing and providing a competitor for shopping outlets. "But you know, you can eat at home but you still enjoy going out to a restaurant so there is a place for both and when they go out then families like to play and that's where we come in.

"Internationally, leisure is growing exponentially and everything that is happening with leisure in other parts of the world is happening here in the Middle East too."

Does Mitchell see the Saudi trend towards stand-alone entertainment locations spreading into other countries? "We are a global brand,



but we operate locally and always present that operation in different ways for different countries. We might operate our locations in Lebanon completely differently to those in Egypt, for example. Every country is different and has to be treated differently. What works in Saudi won't necessarily work elsewhere.

"You can draw the comparisons with the UK, the US, Australia and New Zealand, different countries but with a common language and similar expectations. That does not necessarily exist between Kuwait and Egypt."

The big challenge for Majid Al Futtaim's Entertainment Division, he said, was the competition coming from other international brands. "They are looking at our region increasingly attentively and they will challenge our position. But there are also lots of opportunities here. We are where we want to be at this time. I understand that the FECs in India are doing well and that there are future opportunities there but our group has a Middle East focus irrespective of the Indian opportunities and there is still plenty to do here."

He added: "I want to make sure that we are active in our own market. We have a major flagship brand and a big investment plan for the next three years. For that period our first priority will be the refurbishment and extension to our existing portfolio and, of course, our investment in Saudi."

Majid Al Futtaim's familiar partners within its FEC chain, companies like QubicaAMF, Embed

and Whitehouse Leisure, will continue to be key to the development of the portfolio, he said, although "what we will be coming up with in terms of new concepts in 2019 is completely different from anything we have now."

New trends, said Mitchell, continued to be examined closely for their prospects. "We have looked at escape rooms," for example, "but I regard them as being something I would go to and enjoy once but not necessarily a second time."

The trend very evident locally is for the introduction of amusement parks. Is this seen as a competitor? "They have impacted the discretionary spend but I don't believe that they have yet managed to create that 'experience' I was talking about earlier. Their impact on our business has been comparatively small in my view. Our business may be more impacted by the general public becoming more careful about how they spend their money; that's the real challenge for us."

Mitchell returned to his point about the growth of FECs and their track record as top-earning visitor attractions. "Recent years have shown that our locations can grow at the rate of 20 per cent per annum; that may have been cut to 10 per cent at present but it is still infinitely better than our colleagues in the US or Australia, for example. They may be grateful for a far smaller increase. We have to keep it all in perspective.

"It illustrates the Middle East industry's hunger and ambition for success that they forget sometimes that they have a pattern of over-achievement. Some of our locations still have the same level of appeal even years later. Our Ski Dubai opened 14 years ago but it is still one of the best indoor skiing venues in the world.

"I am really pleased to see that some of our competitors are pushing the envelope and leading the charge to fresh levels of attainment in our industry; it is good for everyone."

His own company, he said, was looking forward to the opening of its third snow venue, in Oman in 2020 having opened the second last year in Egypt. Two more will come in Saudi Arabia and another in partnership with the Reem Mall in Abu Dhabi.

They would comprise another multi-location brand for Majid Al Futtaim's Leisure and Entertainment Division, to go alongside a host of other industry-leading initiatives such as Orbi, Little Explorer, Wahoo, Yalla!, Astroblasters, Gravity, but they are sub-brands of the "big name" chain, Magic Planet, that continues to provide the benchmark against which many in the region measure their own performance.

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Driving innovation and growth

Embed capitalises on advancements in technology to provide its solutions

THE technology that drives gameplay, graphics and soundtracks on products in the entertainment and attractions industry often receives the plaudits for providing the excitement in VR, AR and games.

However, look beneath the glitz and the real excitement often lies in the workhorses that power the businesses enabling the fun to happen.

FECs and attractions nowadays, said Embed, from small to large, acknowledge that in order to meet customer expectations they need the business management systems and tools to ensure maximum guest satisfaction consistently.

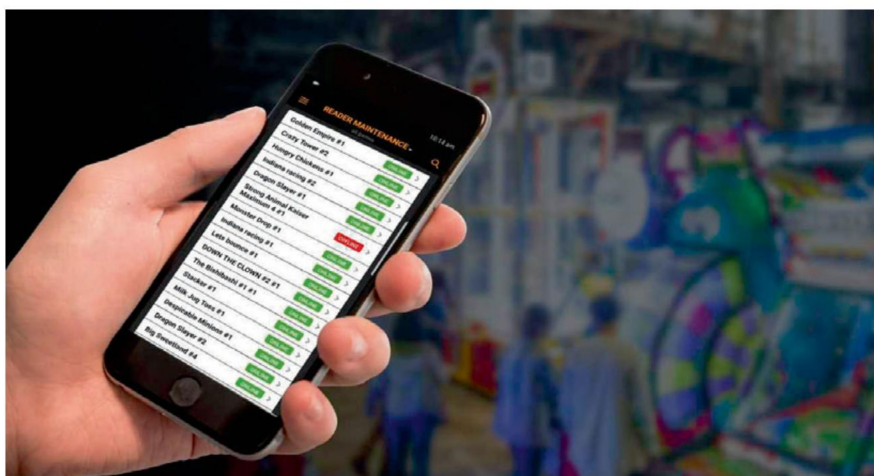
In the Middle East this is most prevalent in the region's hot spots and destinations such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt in addition to Embed's other EMEA markets across Europe and the UK. The uptake of systems such as its Toolkit software along with the smartTouch hardware is a clear indication that the entertainment industry recognises the need to ensure that they can meet their customer expectations when it comes to technology.

Rosa Tahmaseb, managing director for Embed's EMEA business, spearheads the company in this ever-changing landscape and has to meet the region's rapidly-evolving technology needs in order to ensure customers and system end-users can get the experience they expect.

"We are seeing a shift in consumer expectations, with a heavy emphasis on frictionless experiences," she said. "This is due to the trend in the market that companies, such as Airbnb, Careem and Uber, are setting for a seamless customer experience. This expectation is setting the bar higher and higher in ensuring that we empower our clients to offer the same smooth and unified experience to their end users."



Rosa Tahmaseb, managing director, Embed EMEA



"This is what excites our teams so much," said Tahmaseb. "It is the eternal pursuit to not only be the best today but to continue setting the bar higher time and time again for our industry. Our new Embed features, such as Toolkit Assistant and Central Games Management, have been developed with the aim of continuing to develop and push the boundaries on offering a seamless solution. Our customers can easily manage large parts of their business from their smart devices and we aim to cater for this developing trend in business management."

"In addition to this, as part of the wider group, we're proud to have recently launched Booking Boss into our region for the visitor attractions and tours sector, offering a centralised ticketing and booking management solution. With many locations offering experiences beyond simple entry tickets, such as timed and capacity driven attractions and multiple experiences within one space or one booking, Booking Boss is designed for operators to manage these with ease. One of the great things about Booking Boss is that it was designed by our own team, who are all people who've worked in attractions and tour companies themselves, covering sales through to operations. It has been designed by industry experts, therefore it is extremely well thought out and designed to sell a ticket or take a booking from any channel that it can be sold from. It is something we are very proud of."

This changing landscape of business and consumer expectations is not the only thing that has been evolving in the Middle East region, with Saudi Arabia fast becoming a focus with the recent high level of investment into the entertainment sector.

"These are definitely exciting times for our region," Tahmaseb said. "We are delighted to be both attending as well as sponsoring the Saudi Entertainment and Amusement Show in April, as well as supporting the industry here in Dubai by sponsoring the MENALAC awards gala."

The growth in Saudi Arabia is significant; the 2030 vision of this nation is clear, ambitious and dynamic. Tahmaseb believes her team matches these adjectives. "At Embed we are proud to have our long-standing established offices, a highly-skilled support team and some of the best knowledge in the industry making up our management team at the ready and able to cater for this region."

"We have been committed to the Middle East for a good number of years, understand the business culture, care about its success and are excited about working with new businesses across our region to help them achieve better practices and higher revenues using our fantastic technology."

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Fresh studio and big plans for Rabbids

LAI building on successful template

BUILDING on Virtual Rabbids: The Big Ride is never going to be easy for LAI Games.

The company has enjoyed a phenomenal success with the VR game that does not need an attendant, since it was launched at IAAPA in November of 2017.

That award-winning launch has been followed by constant demand and a market position that has been unchallenged as other developers try to emulate Rabbids' success, as was described in our March Part I of this special issue.

Now LAI is demonstrating that throughout that boom period it was planning for further investment in growth and renewing its commitment to bring fresh and innovative, social games to an industry that continues to evolve. That includes multiple fresh releases that were scheduled for this year and that are now coming through and on to the market. And, of course, it has to also mean new content for Virtual Rabbids: The Big Ride.

To achieve all of this, the company has expanded its team in almost every in-house sector and moved into a new, state-of-the-art studio located at One North, often better known as "the Silicon Valley of Singapore."

Said the company's vice president of research and development, Shannon Perell: "One North is not only a hive of creativity and content creation, it is the heart of Singapore's technology hub. It is our objective to immerse ourselves in this content and innovation ecosystem."

The new studio is a custom-built workspace designed to fuel innovation, creativity and productivity. It has 6,000sq.ft of development and game testing space - and even a bar! It also has an additional 1,500sq.ft of workshop area. The studio, said the company, permits LAI on the full game development life-cycle from rapid prototyping and evaluating game ideas.

Said Perell: "Our programming, art, engineering, supply chain and even finance team members, all work side-by-side in the design engineering and delivery of our products



to market in what is essentially a bar-arcade environment. In addition, we are continuing to invest in this team, growing our ability to deliver even more innovative, rewarding and successful games to market."

Now the company has yet more plans to capitalise on its new workspace that will further assist to provide a fun, dynamic and creative environment in which its designers and developers can collaborate. "We have plans to host product launches and other exciting events in our new development headquarters," said marketing director Tabor Carlton. "We want to share our vision and build relationships. There is a lot of great thinking, projects, ideas and undertakings on the horizon and the new location is giving us the opportunity to turn much of it into fruition."

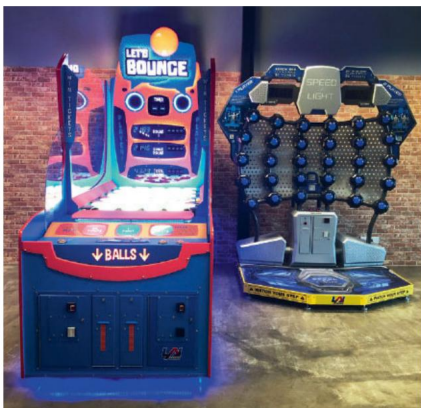
Part of the overall process of bringing games and fresh content to the market is ensuring that a structure of customer support is in place and LAI has spared no pains to ensure that is performance in this area is nothing short of excellent. "We are good at building relationships," said Carlton. "We want to

continue this and expand on it further. No matter how good a game is, the overall performance of the company that turns out the product is no better than its back-up support team. That is the only way to ensure that the performance of the company and of its products continues to meet expectation."

This, he said, is the only way that the company can not only maintain its current levels but come up with new and creative ways in which to achieve the desired effect.

"We will introduce new content for Virtual Rabbids: The Big Ride," said Carlton. "We made that commitment in public a few months ago at IAAPA. Those new experiences will be ready for the international market around the middle of this year. I can promise that they will generate even more enthusiasm for what is already proving to be a groundbreaking game.

"We have been blown away by the reports of the ROI many operators have enjoyed with the game in its original format. The weekly earnings have been running at a level that are almost unheard of in the industry, certainly in recent years. We can maintain that with what's coming."



WoG inspired by Saudi

Embracing the whole MENA region



The WoG team at IAAPA 2018 are from left, sales and development manager Yuhanis Nawasreh, general manager Nabil Kassim, sales executives Sanjar Saidov and Ronalyn Cruz, and account manager Heba Maher

YOU don't get to become a major player in the Middle East market (or any market, for that matter) without knowing your patch.

So it's as well that the team at Warehouse of Games in Dubai has connections and experience across the majority of the area.

Many of the new games to be shown on the company's stand at DEAL were profiled in last month's part one of this Middle East Special Issue and here the company's principals review the MENA situation as it appears to them.

With a strong foothold in established markets like those in the UAE and Egypt, for example, general manager Nabil Kassim and sales and development manager Yuhanis Nawasreh also have a firm grasp on market movements elsewhere too.

"Oman is hot right now," said Nawasreh. "There are lots of new locations in the pipeline from several operators there and tourism is on the rise too, so we expect it to be a steady source of business for the foreseeable future."

Operators such as Al Othaim have already confirmed several new locations in the nation bordering the UAE to the south-east.

The region, as outlined elsewhere in these special issues, has its problems, both economic and political, but the amusement and entertainment industry tends to "fly under the radar." Even long-term hotspots such as Syria retain the faith of Kassim and Nawasreh. "We still believe Syria will open up. We have potential clients and projects that we're working on there. It's settling down and we hope new business will be generated soon."

"India was a good market for us with Landmark's Fun City chain but has slowed down a little recently and Pakistan has some good growth occurring at the moment."

All the growth in the region is principally down to the new machine market. Used machines aren't a sector that WoG commits much time to any more simply because of the labour-intensive nature of refurbishment. "We don't do much with them any more because they're so time consuming," said Nawasreh.

"We have so many new lines that we look after that we simply don't have the time to recondition equipment any more. The other reason is that operators in the GCC only want new anyway. They recognise the value of brand new machines. As with most sectors in the region, the demand is for the biggest, the best and the newest."

"We have in the past taken used machines in part exchange but it becomes 'wood for the fire.' Our warehouse space is precious too, so we can't have old stock taking up valuable space."

Providing equipment is only one of the strings to the WoG bow, however. The head office there also boasts a team of in-house designers who can assist with FEC design from inception to handover.

Kassim said: "We have plans to promote our portfolio of work we've already commissioned at DEAL, on a dedicated section of our booth. We want to showcase our successful designs and show customers that we're not just a place to come for the products, but that we can take care of their design requirements as well. We want clients to see us as a one-stop shop, removing the necessity to involve third parties and thereby streamlining the process."

All this work is especially necessary when the economy is working against you. The UAE has been sluggish (by its standards) for the last couple of years. Money is being spent, but it is being done so with somewhat more consideration.

"The UAE economy is tough; people have less

disposable income after the VAT implementation in January 2018," said Nawasreh. "They are also becoming more careful with what they have and planning for the future. To say the bubble has burst would be too dramatic. There wasn't really a bubble to begin with as such, it was just that people were more carefree."

"I think the slowdown will end soon, it's only a matter of time. It's the whole of the Middle East, not just here. Dubai has the infrastructure, service, tourism and these three are massively important. I think in most of the world this is largely the same - people are more cautious, tourists are spending a little less, locals are spending less and this has a knock-on effect."

"Towards the end of 2019 I think it will start to pick up. 2018 has been one tough year."

Meanwhile, as this issue is arriving at the entrances to DEAL, the company reflected on the growing success of the Dubai event. "It is now one of the world's major shows for the amusement and attractions industry. It is not as big as IAAPA, of course, but it is up there with anything else that the global market has to offer. This year it is going to be bigger and better than ever before."

"From here," said Kassim, "we are moving on to participate in the Saudi Entertainment and Amusement Show 2019, taking place in Jeddah at the end of April. It is a new show but an important one already, simply because of the rapid growth in the entertainment industry in Saudi. We really believe that Vision 2030 is going to revolutionise a huge new market for our industry, so it is a very exciting time for the business."

Visitors to DEAL will find a great deal of fresh product on the WoG booth. From tenpin bowling to VR, from kiddie rides to top-line new video, from redemption to novelties, it will all be there.

'Chuting stars

Frontgrid glides into DEAL with ParadropVR

THE Middle East is a market that always strives to show the newest, most innovative and cutting edge attractions, so it's no surprise to see a company like Frontgrid and its ParadropVR product making waves there.

"We're proud to be working with some of the biggest names in the region, such as the Landmark Group and Emaar Entertainment," said co-founder and chief executive, Matt Wells. "A little further afield, we're really excited to be launching a ParadropVR City Flyer with King Power at the Mahanakhon (the second tallest building in Thailand) in Bangkok this summer, with several more projects in the region due to be announced."

So, in a relatively short space of time, the UK manufacturer has attracted the attention of some seriously big players and it's quite easy to see why.

"More and more operators are telling us that guests are seeking out adventure-based experiences and active leisure options. This is a trend we're seeing globally, but especially so in the Middle East where a big proportion of the population live in urban environments."

"ParadropVR is a great fit for the Middle East," explained Wells. "More and more operators are telling us that guests are seeking out adventure-based experiences and active leisure options. This is a trend we're seeing globally, but especially so in the Middle East where a big proportion of the population live in urban environments. As an immersive adventure attraction that simulates flying a paraglider, ParadropVR really fits the bill. It delivers an adrenaline-fuelled experience that is incredibly realistic - there's nothing closer to the real thing!"

Wells described how ParadropVR is suitable for most people, not just adrenaline junkies and thrill-seekers. "With a minimum height of 1.1m, kids, teenagers and adults all love the ride. It's always fun to see how different people react - some like to twist and turn their way through the skies for an extreme ride, while others prefer to soar around and soak up the views," he said.

"ParadropVR is actually really social. It delivers a compelling spectator experience; people love to stand and watch, see how much their friends and family score and share photos of what's happening on the ride. So it makes a great anchor attraction for malls, resorts, FECs and indoor parks that want to pull in the crowds."

ParadropVR also addresses the repeat play issue that is always high on an operator's list, said Wells. "It's a skill-based game that is really fun and adds a competitive angle - guests immediately want to have another go to try and beat their score. We also develop custom content for operators who want to offer an experience that's completely aligned with their destination or brand."

For King Power in Thailand, Wells and his team are developing bespoke VR content, which will let guests fly in a 4km area around the King Power Mahanakhon, steering between skyscrapers and through hoops to score points. With so many iconic landmarks and luxury resorts developing in the Middle East, he of course sees huge opportunity for ParadropVR, to help bring such destinations to life in an immersive way.

"We understand just how important it is for operators to have an attraction that can deliver volume with maximum uptime and minimal operating costs. As such, ParadropVR is a fully turnkey attraction and very easy to operate and maintain. It's manufactured in the UK and, is certified to international safety standards. We also offer comprehensive support, so wherever you are in the world, you're only ever a phone call away," said Wells.

The Frontgrid team is also working on two new ParadropVR games, which has it as excited as it is with the current mountain flyer game, and will be released later this year.



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Semnox rising to the Saudi challenge

Cashless systems supplier banks another strong year

LIKE most of the suppliers to the Middle East family entertainment centres market, Tushar Berge is looking forward to the great promise that is Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi authorities are putting into place the infrastructure to support literally hundreds of entertainment initiatives of all kinds, as part of its Vision 2030 programme.

Berge, who heads up the Middle East business for Indian debit card systems developer Semnox, famed for its Parafait product, has already had a good year in the region for his products, without taking into account the great potential that is undoubtedly coming with the Saudi expansion. "The government has a US\$64bn investment plan for entertainment – and that is just the start of it.

"We have seen a surge in enquiries and conversion to the Semnox system in the last six-to-nine months from the Saudi region."

Elsewhere, he said, the Chuck E Cheese's franchises in the Middle East will move on to the Playpass system from Semnox in the coming year. "We hope to have most of the CEC franchises moved to cashless during the next 12 months," he said. "And we will continue to invest further in the Saudi market, since we believe that to be the most exciting of prospects."

Berge reported that the company had had a strong overall growth in the Middle East, across both indoor FECs and outdoor parks in 2018. "Newer FEC chains are adopting our solution knowing that it caters for their existing requirements and also our future product development aligns with what they seek to innovate and bring into their updated offer."

A classic example, he said, was the Cheeky Monkeys chain of around 10 locations. It provides edutainment play and birthday celebration facilities for children aged up to eight



A Cheeky Monkeys location in the UAE

years. "It provides an unparalleled arena for daily social and educational interactions focused on children and teachers, and children with parents," he said. "The chain has been expanding rapidly in the Middle East and now has 10 sites with plans to move into other parts of the world very shortly.

"They adopted our system taking off their existing legacy system knowing that the uniqueness of their operations fitted better with the modular system that we can offer and support, making their expansion easier."

Cheeky Monkeys managing director Shazad Ali Abdullah commented: "We have a unique concept where entertainment is combined with education for the kids so that the learning is fun and parents do appreciate these concepts. We have seen a strong acceptance of our offering. To continue with our growth strategy and continued innovation, we needed a partner with a solution for current needs but also one ready to work with us to expand on the solution footprint as we grow.

"We also know that many systems providers will say 'yes' to every feature during the initial discussions but as we move forward we learn that some of those features are not yet ready or don't work the way we need them to work.

"That has been a major difference as far as Semnox is concerned. The company has clearly demonstrated that our needs can be implemented in their solution and how it will operate, what development plans they have and how they will support us going forward.

"We are happy that we have chosen Semnox and have rolled out its 'check-in/check-out' module and party reservation module across all of our existing sites."

The Semnox way is progress by constant innovation, adopting new technologies, applying fresh techniques and ensuring that it can provide a single, comprehensive solution that is way beyond a simple debit card system. Couple that



A major US Location for Parafait, Game Time

with local and 24/7 support makes decision making easier for operators to select Semnox, said Berge.

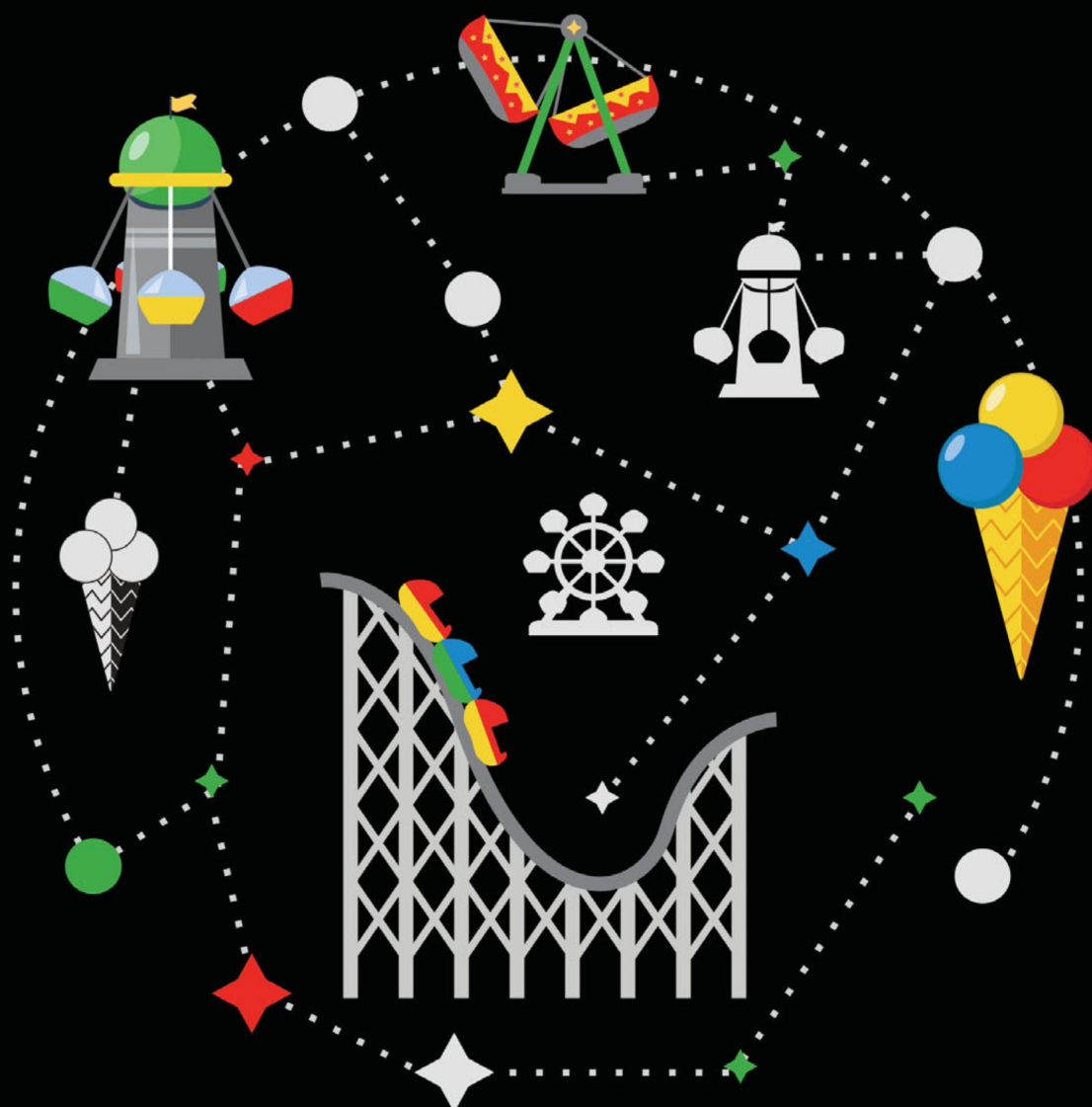
"FEC locations are expanding and transforming at a very fast pace and have moved way beyond the original images of 'arcades' into entertainment destinations for the family and friends, comprising games, soft play, F and B, adventure activities and even more extreme ones involving a waiver signoff. Therefore, the traditional card systems for each of these activities is just not workable. That's where we see a big trend for operators across the world moving into a single system such as ours where it is seamless for every activity and management and operational processes are efficient."

He believes that larger operators with multiple locations are now employing greater value offerings to their clients as competition steps up. Increasing the range and complexity of the offers in a location, new technologies disrupting the traditional formats of running a venue, are emphasising the need for a single, comprehensive system.

"We are in talks with larger multiple operators to see how we can support their existing and immediate needs, how we can align with their plans and how we can seamlessly transfer from one system to another. All of this suggests exciting times ahead of us, and we are looking forward to the challenge."



The Parafait system will apply to all forms of pastime in a location, including climbing walls



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Parafait is a feature-rich, world-class, award-winning RFID debit card solution that can be a complete automated management system for all areas of family entertainment centers, amusement parks, theme parks, food courts and attractions industry.

Festivals worth a careful look

Bob's Space Racers diversifies its reach

LAST month we talked of Bob's Space Racers' 50th anniversary and of Dave Sandstrom's 25th anniversary of his career with the company, but they are not the end to the anniversaries.

It is also the 10th anniversary of BSR's special venture with the Al Hokair group in Saudi Arabia.

Director of international sales Sandstrom was instrumental in setting that up, a five-game operation in two locations in 2010 that has now expanded to seven cities, 21 locations operating 41 games.

And "games" in the case of BSR, of course, means the big multiplayer carnival-style ball roll or water shoot game that packs them in at FECs.

President Jack Cook said: "Al Hokair remains our largest venture outside of our normal manufacturing business and the only operational partners outside of the US. Our plans are to continue our growth in areas that need games but at the same time not to overload the locations with too many games."

Now BSR and Al Hokair are looking at the possibilities of adding to their joint venture outside of the kingdom in an even bigger and closer relationship than that in which they are currently engaged. "Written contracts are sometimes signed but our true agreement is in our handshake and upmost respect that we have for one-another," said Cook. "It has been a great experience to work with them and engage in a trusting relationship for so long."

The entertainment sector in Saudi, he said, continues to grow at a rapid pace. BSR's main operations have been in shopping malls but the company is now expanding into festivals and stand-alone entertainment locations. This, along with movie theatres now opening there, will mean a lot of growth in future, he said. "While the attention has been on movie theatres and new parks opening, the greatest opportunity for amusements may be in the festival operations. These see many more people in a shorter time frame than a permanent location. If you compare it to the US carnivals and where they are today, if the festivals have longevity and good organisations promoting them, it will be a high revenue producing part of the entertainment sector."

He added: "The festival sector, like the carnivals industry, is not an easy environment in which to operate, so it is not going to be a business that everyone will like to take part in. The portability of the amusements and the costs and logistics associated will be the biggest challenge to produce a quality product."

If Saudi is booming - or about to do so - the rest of the Middle East is maintaining a slower and steadier pace, he said. "Some projects have slowed openings but there are still others that are right on schedule. Our games are normally last to go into the location and our delivery schedules still have a lot of new equipment being shipped to the region. Our business has not changed very much as we do have peaks and troughs, but it all normally averages out. Our games also have a great reputation for producing high revenue, making it a good investment to an operation. This reputation continues to strengthen and that keeps boosting our presence in operations throughout the region."

Of course it is not all Al Hokair. BSR has an excellent relationship with all of the big players through its distributor, ASI. Al Othaim, Magic Planet and Fun City are all, he said, excellent partners "who use our games in all of their locations. Without these great partners and friends our games might not have the popularity and growth that they continue to enjoy."

BSR, he said, is currently enjoying a boost in its demand from other areas of the world too, notably from south-east Asia as the entertainment model expands. With the help of ASI, BSR has also moved into other areas such as Pakistan and countries of North Africa.

The water game continues to be the king of the BSR range, plus a whole plethora of midway skill games. "The Middle East market is always looking at anything new and it is eager to try new games as they enter the market. The size of our games seem to be the same and in some cases larger than those used in North America."

Cook and his colleagues are looking forward to showing the new Hang Time at DEAL. It was a game introduced at

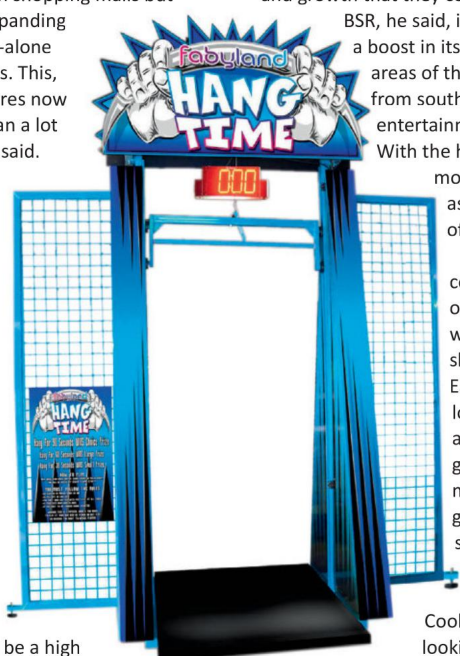


A new attendant-free water game that BSR is putting in smaller locations in Saudi

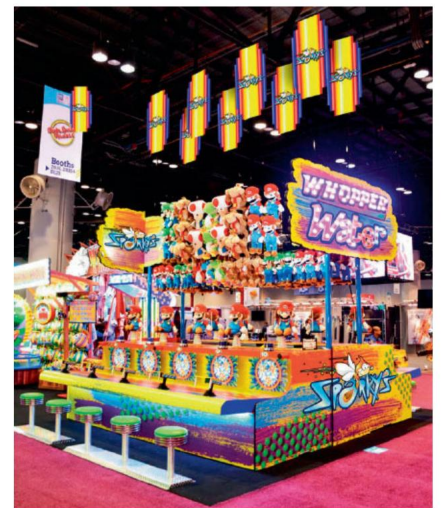
IAAPA last November and will have its Middle East debut at the Dubai show.

In his domestic market, there has been a pattern of closures of what Cook describes as "big box retailers," meaning often anchor stores in shopping malls, thus creating some prime position real estate coming on to the market and this is driving up the fortunes of the FEC business.

It is worth noting that another cause for celebration at BSR is the tribute made to the company by the city of Holly Hill, where the company's factory is located at 427 15th Street. That thoroughfare has now been renamed by the city as Whac a Mole Way, in tribute to an iconic BSR game. What a way to celebrate!



The Hang Time that will go from DEAL into an Al Othaim location



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A 20-year testimony to quality

InterCard prolific throughout the ME

It was the Encounter Zone - one of the very first FECs in the Middle East, which opened in the Wafi Mall in Dubai over 20 years ago - that introduced InterCard to the region.

The company has since gone on to become the most prolific supplier of cashless technology to the region.

At one time or another, InterCard has worked with every big name in the region, from Al Hokair and Al Othaim to one-venue operations, and the company reports that business continues strongly, as the region continues to expand its entertainment offer.

Saudi Arabia remains the largest operating area in the region and therefore InterCard's most visited country, said Alberto Borrero, the company's senior vice-president of international sales and the man probably most well known in the debit card business throughout the region. He said that the company is currently opening new sites with both of the big two Saudi operators, both in their domestic market and in their expansion into surrounding countries.

Those new sites include some smaller installations, one-offs that receive the same level of concentrated attention as any of the bigger groups; the Al Qarat Mall at Madinah, Saudi Arabia, is a good example.

The Saudi government's Vision 2030 programme is at the root of most of the new developments in the country, said Borrero. "This will create an increased need for our technology. This is because it enables improved efficiency in business operations and that will support the objectives of Vision 2030 for the entertainment sector."

The company reports that it continues to expand in Iraq where there are over 50 venues using its technology. Borrero reported that there are also more than 30 locations working with InterCard in Jordan. He expects to open more



On the show floor at IAAPA 2018 are (left to right) Ibrahim Alabdallah, Scott Sherrod, InterCard CEO and Abdallah Alabdallah. The Alabdallahs are from Galaxy Park in Amman, Jordan

locations in the country as InterCard continues its work with major operator Galaxy Park.

Within the Gulf Co-operation Council (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar) region, Qatar has been a strong market with 10 locations taking up InterCard systems in 2018. "Oman is doing well. We replaced several of our competitors' systems and installed seven new sites during the year. We have also seen progress in Kuwait where Tamdeen is opening its second giant location and where Future Kid, with over 40 venues, is using InterCard and expanding." He added that, in Bahrain, Kids Kingdom had added InterCard to all three of its amusement venues that will be interconnected by the installer.

Borrero was able to paint a picture of constant activity for InterCard all over the Middle East region and he was looking forward to the opening of the DEAL show. Overall, he said, much of the Middle East market was now becoming mature, especially in the GCC countries. He was, however, enthusiastic about the North African countries and their potential. "Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt all have a great number of tourists and are bouncing back after the challenges of the 'Arab Spring'. It make sense for us to take up all of the opportunities there."

The company's products accomplish a great deal more than simply validate games and rides and act as POS payment processing. The back-office systems and the opportunities to recognise loyal customers are vital parts of the InterCard offer and the company is constantly updating, upgrading and introducing new ideas into its products. This year, InterCard has introduced a monitoring system for its equipment that can proactively notify its global service team of issues before the customer is even aware of them.

"Our NEMS (Nagios Enterprise Monitoring System) will watch over and report on such key network indicators as uptime, heartbeat and hardware threshold limits," said Scott Sherrod, InterCard's CEO. "This specific information will

permit support staff to remotely resolve issues in the customer's equipment and provide truly proactive monitoring to keep customers' centres in operation."

Unlike its competitors, InterCard produces all of its own software and hardware in-house for greater reliability and security. It has a development team that includes more than a dozen software engineers, a firmware engineer and an electrical engineer, most of them boasting at least a decade of experience. "We have been leading the way in cashless technology for the amusement industry since we introduced the first debit card system," said Sherrod. "So the industry can expect to see innovation from InterCard in all of our product categories."

At DEAL, InterCard will also be featuring its enhanced The Edge mobile app collection that builds on iService, the industry's first mobile management app. This was introduced in 2017; iService making it simple to track and manage every arcade game at one or more locations. Users can remotely disable a game for maintenance and technicians can use it to track repair information.

With the addition to two new apps, The Edge mobile app collection assists InterCard customers to do even more with mobile technology. InterCard's Upshot is a management app that FEC owners can provide to their customers under their own brand. It permits the customer to easily add value to multiple game cards directly from a mobile device instead of a visit to the kiosk.

Then there is the Inventory app that saves money by enabling easy management of redemption inventory from an Android or iOS mobile device. Staff can scan UPC codes on the merchandise, reducing the labour cost of inventory management and eliminating mistakes.

It is all indicative of the levels of thought and ingenuity that InterCard is injecting into its portfolio of product these days.



A Future Kid FEC at Kuwait equipped with InterCard



The Volcano Slide at the Lollipop Funland at Amman, Jordan, a location using InterCard

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Chalking up 60 years!

Elaut reaches a major milestone

STEFAAN Vaerewyck and the principals of his company, brother and sister Eric and Helga Verstraeten, will join with their Elaut colleagues later this year in a series of events - probably timed to coincide with IAAPA in Orlando - to celebrate 60 years in the amusement machine business.

Vaerewyck is international sales manager for the company with a "patch" that is basically the entire globe and therefore he, Eric and Helga have friends in the amusement industry from every corner of the world; and IAAPA in Florida will see at least most of them in one place at one time.

"I am not sure what's on the agenda for that," said Vaerewyck. "You'll have to talk with Eric to find out what he's planned, but we certainly won't let a 60th anniversary pass by without marking it."

In fact, Eric Verstraeten correctly identified what his customers and friends would like the most. "We'll have a big party," he said. "It will be during IAAPA but it won't just be a party. We will mark the occasion in another way as well, through the games we build later in the year." Whatever that means...

Verstraeten outlined a policy of the company in this diamond jubilee year. "We want to address the elements of skill in our games; it has come a little under the spotlight, especially in the US. Putting back more skill element in a crane is a difficult thing to balance correctly. The machine has to reward skill but also has to pay back the operator. That is not easy, but we recognise the issues raised in the US around skill and compensators and we are committed going forward to re-establish a level of skillful play being rewarded." An ambition for 2019 that they will take very seriously.

"Whatever we do in the US," he said, "we will replicate in other markets too." And that means the Middle East, for many years the source of excellent business for the Belgian company, as we outlined in last month's issue.

"We do special things for the Middle East," he said. "We respect the local cultures with minor but important alterations to our cabinets and the way the games operate."

Vaerewyck and the Elaut team - led by Eric Verstraeten himself - will go to the DEAL show with the biggest Elaut sellers in the region in 2018, the Ticket Circus and E-Claw in its latest version at the head of them. They will also take the Cosmic XL giant crane into the show. In its latest version it was given a debut at the IAAPA at the back-end of November last year and was taken for its first European outing to the London EAG show in January.

In Dubai the Elaut display will be split between the stands of two distributors, London's United Distributing Company and Dubai's Amusement Services International, who handle the games locally. For both of those companies, the E-Claw is the king of Elaut cranes; now in its ninth version, the game is familiar in almost every FEC throughout the Middle East. "There must be hundreds of them in operation," said Vaerewyck. "The Middle East loves this crane."

The company will also have its licensed pusher machine The Flintstones - on ticket payout of course for that market.

Elaut has considerable loyalty to both of its distributors. "Mark Horwood at UDC largely opened this market many years ago for the E-Claw and Prakash Vivekanand, the local distributor, has done well for us with the pusher Diamonds and Pearls and with Ticket Circus," said Vaerewyck.

He and his colleagues, with Eric Verstraeten, will divide their time between the two stands and will look forward to another year of consolidation for their products in what is, for them, one of the world's best FEC regions.



Elaut CEO Eric Verstraeten with the Cosmic XL oversized crane



Classic E-Claw machines that are seen all over the Middle East. These are the latest versions seen at the London EAG show

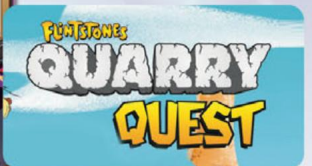


International sales manager Stefaan Vaerewyck with Elaut's new Quarry Quest pusher game

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Strong line-up for UDC

Bevy of new releases set to treat clients at DEAL

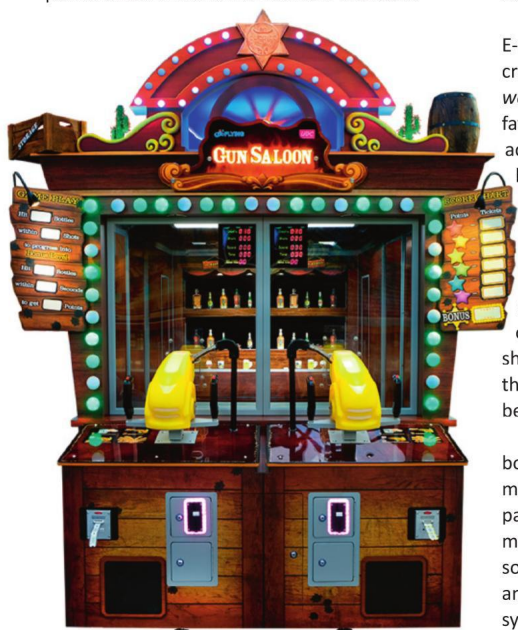
THE popularity of redemption, cranes, photo booths, kiddie rides and the like in the Middle East is matched only by UDC's commitment to the market.

This will be seen in part by the plethora of new product on the UK distributor's booth at DEAL. It's a good job that the *InterGame* special issue for this region is split into two parts, otherwise we wouldn't be able to fit them all to a page!

March's report focused on some of its products but also on UDC's longevity in the area. It is a measure of global industry confidence in managing director Mark Horwood and his team that a UK company is trusted to handle sales to a region nearly 5,000 miles away! That said, it has often been remarked that the FEC and amusement industry in the Middle East is very similar to that of the US and what works anywhere else will work there too. However, that knowledge on its own is not enough. Having the contacts on the ground and the time-served relationships in the many different sub-markets in this diverse area is vital - and UDC has these in abundance.

These contacts and clients are going to have a lot to pore over this year, quite apart from the new range from Benchmark showcased last month.

Gun Saloon is a wild-west saloon-themed shooting gallery game. Up to two players take aim at rows of bottles, but the weapons used are the real stars here. The "guns" are large, twin-handled cannons that fire ball bearings using compressed air and emit a satisfying thwack as they hurtle out of the barrel and smack the targets. Tickets are won for reaching certain points tallies and a bonus round is available.



Funny Cart is a shopping cart vid-emption game aimed at younger children. A brightly-coloured shopping cart is the player's vehicle and the child sits in this to steer the on-screen action, scoring points while collecting shopping. For younger players who may struggle to steer properly or need help, adults can manoeuvre the cart using a large handle on the back of the seat. Bright, colourful graphics, catchy music and sound effects accompany players attempting to win tickets as they shop. Funny Cart is fitted with a multi-coin mechanism as standard and is compatible with all leading card systems.

The Pony Trekking carousel is a three-seater mini-carousel aimed at younger children. Featuring colourful, illuminated pony characters, the compact ride allows three riders to enjoy Pony Trekking for the price of one. Complementing this key feature is a flexible price per play. The tree canopy in the centre of the ride lights up with a disco-style effect while interactive features include the ability to touch the animals on the trunk of the tree to hear them make sounds. The ponies gently move up and down like a traditional carousel, while ride speed remains steady to ensure safety. An emergency stop button is included.

Needing no introduction is Elaut's range of E-Claw cranes. One of the best performing cranes in the region (*and probably the world!* - Ed), they remain a firm favourite with FECs and players across the Middle East. UDC will have an E-Claw Harmony in Dubai that features a lower prize deck than other models, with more space for a larger number of prizes to be on show at once. The taller windows show off even more of the prizes available to be won.

The Harmony boasts a leading mechanism that utilises patented, digital linear motor technology, sophisticated sensors and an intelligent control system for extreme reliability and



smooth operation. It also offers environmentally friendly, RGB LED lighting to produce thousands of colour combinations. These intelligent cranes can weigh prizes and can be adjusted to award wins based upon the price of play and the cost of the plush. The system can be set to operate inside of a desired percentage so operating at a loss is avoided.

Meteor Ball is a skill-based ticket redemption game suitable for children and adults. Players use the steering wheel to move the hopper at the bottom of the playfield to catch the meteors as they drop from outer space. More meteors caught equals more tickets won. A brightly coloured cabinet with colour changing LED lighting and a large top-flash/marquee advertises the big bonus ticket prize that can be won, along with a three-window prize showcase for operators to show off some of the prizes on offer.

Rounding off the UDC portfolio for the show is the Eclipse LED photo booth from Digital Centre. It features a 12ft curved LED display surrounding the cabinet on both sides that plays video, shows photos and can be used as a promotional tool for bespoke advertising. Photographs are printed via a high-quality Mitsubishi dye sublimation printer on 4 x 6ins photo paper and include a special QR code that can be scanned using a freely available smartphone app, downloadable for both iOS and Android devices. The QR code enables customers to share their pictures and videos online via social media using a cloud based system, where they remain for up to six months.



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Gun Saloon 2 Player
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Candy Bot
Kids Sweet Vend



Funny Cart
Video with Tickets



Robot Storm
Water Shooting Video



Moto X Racing
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Space Jump



Ticket Station



Duckling Fight



E-Claw Cranes



Pony Trekking



Meteor Ball



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Making bowling amazing

QubicaAMF forging ahead with new technologies

HAVING established that tenpin bowling had managed to evade the apparent downturn in revenues suffered by the leisure industry in the Middle East region in 2018, QubicaAMF director of business development Roger Creamer this month talks about the upcoming plans and contracts won by the company in the region for this year.

"Our friends at the Majid Al Futtaim Entertainment and Leisure company continue to be an extremely important customer for us going forward with some quite ambitious expansion plans for bowling in the next year or two. Until they are ready to announce those plans, I cannot say more, except that it will be very significant for us."

Chief among the demands of the region are the fresh technologies coming out of the QubicaAMF R&D department. Said Creamer: "Bowling has survived decades of competition and with ever-advancing technology that competition has been fierce recently. For us to continue to combat that threat we need to constantly come up with something new immediately and have other fresh offerings in the pipeline going forward."

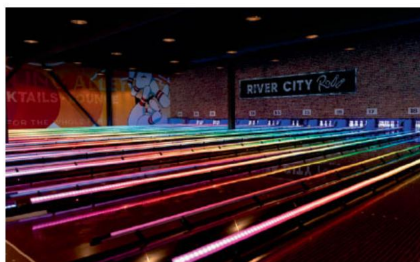
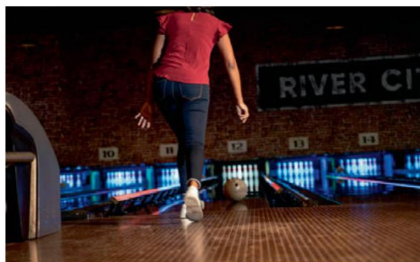
"In the past five years or so, QubicaAMF has invested over US\$32m in R&D. We have upgraded or re-engineered almost our entire product range. More recently the investment has been in what we term The Future of Bowling and Making Bowling Amazing programmes."

First on the scene in that initiative was HyperBowling, originally previewed at IAAPA in 2017 and then launched to the bowling industry at Bowl Expo in Las Vegas last June. HyperBowling went on to win an IAAPA Brass Ring Award for the Best New Product in 2018. "Who would have believed that such a prestigious award would go to a bowling equipment manufacturer?" asked Creamer.

HyperBowling has played its part in Making Bowling Amazing, installed in a number of US locations, in the Netherlands close to Schiphol Amsterdam Airport, in Milan, Italy, and in Birmingham in the UK. The production run for 2019, said Creamer, has already been sold out and there is a waiting list for 2020 and even beyond that.

This year, QubicaAMF is adding more experts to its R&D department, already bigger than the combined departments of all of its competitors, it believes. "While HyperBowling was being developed its concept was kept very much under wraps and other products that are being developed for the future are likewise known only to those actually working on them. I have to use the old saying, watch this space."

Creamer and his colleagues have long moved away from the old precept that tenpin bowling commercially needs to be presented as a sport. "Time spent at leisure has exposed bowling



to a wider audience. Sport bowling still makes a significant contribution to bowling centre operators, however. Our research among consumers shows that even leisure customers still want to win! Many found that the traditional game did not often give them that chance but after trying HyperBowling, where the result can be turned around as late as the last shot, they are not only entertained but are competing to win."

He agrees, however, that sport bowling has in places been in decline for some years but that slowdown seems to have been arrested. "Successful centres that have thrived almost completely on bowling for fun are returning to sport, realising that the quiet times - early evening at the beginning of the week - are more easily filled with leagues than to try to change the habits of the leisure seeker."

Creamer believes that sport bowling has not been in decline at all in the Middle East, south-east Asia, Korea and Japan where there has been very little change in the competitive programmes. There are, he said, places where the sports side of bowling has increased. The Professional Bowlers Association in the US has signed a multi-year deal with Fox, the broadcasting company, that will mean more televised tournaments hitting the small screen than ever in the past decade and with higher prize funds. After the first few events in 2019, Nielsen, the ratings organisation, is showing that the PBA Tour is attracting more viewers today than it has for a decade.

"Bowling's equivalent of the Ryder Cup (golf), the Weber Cup, in which the US plays against Europe, will move for the first time from Europe when it will be located in the Mandalay Bay Hotel in Las Vegas in mid-June. This is a direct result of the popularity of the live broadcasts on Sky Sports, syndicated around the world."

How does the game handle this cross-hatching of sport versus fun? "It is a personal thing," said Creamer, "but having been brought up in bowling when sport was strong, I believe that the next move must be for the government bodies to look closely at what they do and start to do what many other sports have had to do to stay relevant in changing times. Perhaps change the format, change the rules, but make it snappier and the result quicker to appeal to a non-bowling audience. If that happens, the outcome could be even more trying bowling on a night out."

QubicaAMF has been regularly attending the DEAL show for 15 years and it has always enjoyed exhibiting both the full-size game and the mini-bowling products. It is indeed rare for any of the equipment taken to Dubai for the show gets shipped back to the company after the event. They have either found a home in the UAE, Saudi Arabia or somewhere else within the Middle East.

"We will hold on to the equipment after the show and send it to the exhibition in Saudi Arabia, that is being held April 21-23."

Creamer himself will be at DEAL, this year accompanied by Flavio Taddia from the company's Bologna office, who was there last year. Also on the stand will be Khaled Shalaby, who looks after the company's interests as Middle East distributor through Aida Leisure Equipment.

Creamer remains steadfastly confident in the product and in its future. "With our ownership and management structure, I am absolutely certain that, as we have since the Qubica legacy owners acquired QubicaAMF a few years ago, we will continue to grow, creating the products of tomorrow today and driving bowling forward. Our mission is to make bowling amazing - the people at QubicaAMF will deliver it."



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MAKING BOWLING AMAZING

New kid on the block - but settling in nicely

TouchMagix making immediate impact

TOUCHMAGIX has made more established names in the industry sit up and take notice since its arrival on the scene not too long ago.

"Our entry into the industry has been a pleasant and welcoming one," said Jayesh Kariya, CEO. "It's a small and closely knit industry that is constantly working as a team to uplift each other, resulting in the increase in the overall size of the industry. Every player in the industry acknowledges and respects the effort behind a good game, even though it is from a close competitor. This creates a very healthy and friendly environment for everyone to co-exist and grow together."

"In a very short space of time, our games have been sold to some of the world's best locations and have brought smiles to the faces of their guests. The sole purpose of bringing smiles to the guests inspires us every day to design and build better games for the future. We are very excited for the future this industry has for us and are committed to the long term and sustainable success of it."

In the Middle East, like elsewhere, TouchMagix has seen a successful introduction of its titles and as DEAL is upon us, Kariya considers the work his company has done in the region thus far to get to where it is.

"The Middle East market is very quality conscious and among the early adopters of new games outside of the US. They tend to prefer licences and titles with high revenue earning potential. They also like brightly lit, attractive cabinets as the locations here are so well lit and bright compared to the US, so we have started selling a lot of games there in the last year."

"We are optimistic of above-par growth in 2019 with the launch of our three new, original titles - Dicey Jump, Hop 'N' Stack and Mystery Island that have been doing extremely well in the US, UAE, India and are getting installed all over the world as we speak."

For TouchMagix the MENA region is covered by Warehouse of Games and, like others, they share a mutually beneficial relationship. "WoG are our exclusive distributor for the MENA region and we share a very special relationship with a lot of mutual respect and admiration for their team. They bring in a lot of business from this

region, as they are a go-to supplier with location operators. Their complete solutions package and under-one-roof approach enable customers to derive best value with a single point of contact. They also constructively contribute in the product feedback as they have access to early development updates. This helps bring a good product to the market that is in line with market gap and expectations."

Kariya explained that TouchMagix is constantly working with its current and potential future distributors on planning its inroads into new markets. "Saudi is anticipated to grow in the short and long term and we are working with WoG closely for the opportunity and the potential that exists in this region. We are also very bullish on North Africa and the growth potential that it is expected to provide to our industry."

"We are also very bullish on India with CSML as our distributors," he said. "They are rightly poised to be the largest and one of the best in the business, with a very quality conscious and aggressive leadership. India is seeing huge amounts of investment being made by the existing players to upgrade and enhance their locations. We are also witnessing a very promising young, new

breed of entrepreneurs venturing into the family entertainment business. This is a great sign that the industry is moving forward in a very positive direction."

So, with such a burgeoning market to cater to with successful products and the right distributors in place, what of the DEAL show? Surely this must be just the event for Kariya and his team? "TouchMagix is a US-based manufacturer and the DEAL show has been the premier show for us for the entire Middle East region. We cannot think of any better way than this show to meet customers and open the market from this region and showcase our products. We are totally dependent on this show for the opportunity it brings to our company from this area."

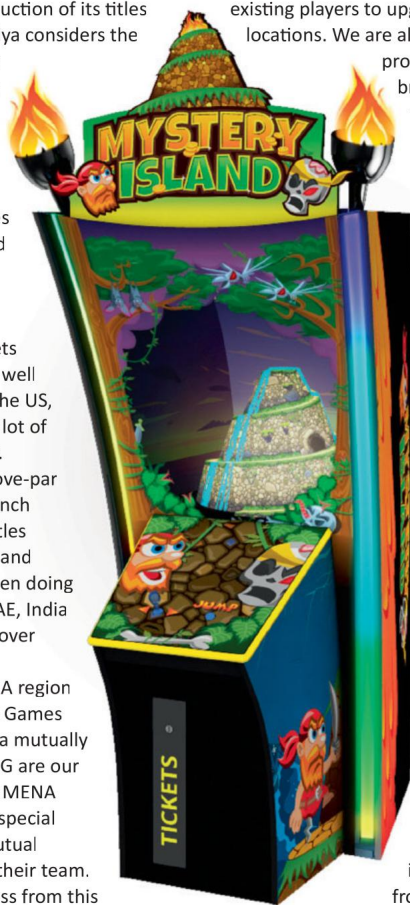


At the show, TouchMagix will be showcasing its entire range of products including the new product launches, Dicey Jump, Hop N Stack and Mystery Island. "These are very promising games and have been contributing significantly to our sales since their launch at the IAAPA show last November," said Kariya.

The success that the machines have enjoyed while being original, non-licensed titles brings an even greater sense of satisfaction for Kariya and his team. He believes that while licensing has proven to be successful for a lot of games, "we are working to bring some great licences to some of our current and future games in conjunction with a specialised agency. However, we strongly believe that great gameplay is most important in the continued and sustainable success for any business. Pac-Man was not a licence and neither was Pong."

"We believe in bringing simple-to-understand and hard-to-master games to the industry. A good licence can bring a player to try the game much more quickly compared to an original title but cannot compel them to continue playing and trying to master it. We have an exciting range of games and a very promising line-up planned for release in the next few months."

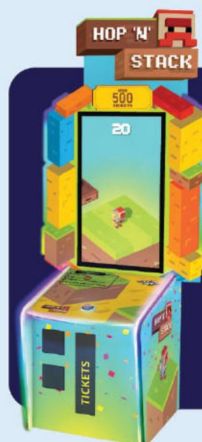
Touch Magix's vision, said Kariya, "is to produce games with the most innovative and never-before-seen technology to the market. At the same time, we want to bring in the easiest-to-understand and hardest-to-master games, so it helps our operators to maximise revenue."





:DICEY JUM:P

- 10 Weeks ROI
- ♥ Addictive redemption game
- Appeals to all ages!
- 30 seconds average game time
- Cabinet Dims:**
35L x 41W x 102H inches



HOP 'N' STACK

- 12 Weeks ROI
- ♥ Addictive redemption game
- Appeals to all ages!
- Swipe to continue feature 30 seconds average game time
- Cabinet Dims:**
35L x 43W x 102H inches



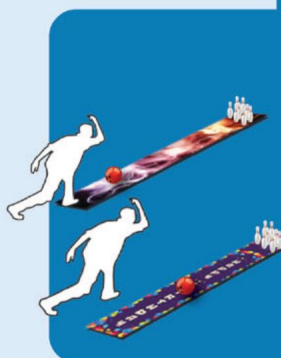
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- Appeals to all ages!
- Cabinet Dims:**
56L x 24W x 102H inches



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Widest-ever range of 'add-ons'

Sacoa adds yet more depth to debit cards systems

ALTHOUGH Sacoa itself refers to its add-on applications as "novelties," the most discerning of the Middle East's professional operators will regard them as rather more than that.

Perhaps "aids to improve performance" might be more accurate, because the widest range of back-up ideas for operators of Sacoa's debit card systems ever produced by the company will greatly assist users to get the most from their card systems.

Apart from Sacoa's self-inflicted modesty, users of its very cutting-edge technology will want to know more about just what they can do to ramp up still more the effectiveness of the debit card system.

To begin with there is Spark, the low-cost game controller solution. The small-footprint Spark with its 2.8ins HD colour reader, comes with RFID and NFC reading capability, so that cards, wristbands, tokens or key fobs can be used. A magnetic card has now become just an option.

Spark will enhance the customer experience with its backlight colouring that can be adjusted to show age restrictions, promotions, tickets awarded and many other messages and advertising. The device is fully Universal Card Link compatible and is water and dust resistant in its "tap" version.

Then there is the online platform mobile app, which allows registered guests to check their Playcard balance, purchase special offers, pay online with a credit card and accumulate reward points. The app also provides store details, including map location, direct phone number, website link and online party booking access and will provide push notifications ability to keep customers updated with the latest offers and news. It can also be branded with a venue's own logo or colours, and is available for both iOS and Android platforms.

For the people in the back office there is Zodiac, the administration console. This user-friendly,



multi-lingual system configuration tool is web-based. It permits configuring with any system detail through a simple web browser, whether it is a desktop computer, a tablet or even from a smartphone. Items that may be configured include game pricing, POS and mPOS products and buttons, product stock, security and other applications. It also includes tools for system maintenance and reporting, rather like a trouble-shooting "wizard" and comes with video tutorials. It will also monitor system health, can enable or disable game controllers and access control. Card roaming and search, sales and collection report access are all in there.

Another is the ability to offer waivers, signing through CRM so that registered guests can sign waivers online before entering the venue. This will provide a faster check-in experience and the waivers are stored online.

M-POS is a feature that many operators will find invaluable. Compact and portable, the new Mobile POS permits all of the features that the desktop POS can manage, such as Playcard analysis, sales and recharge and retail merchandise, plus other functions

and supports credit card payment, printing and game emulation as well, all in a user-friendly interface.

The Sacoa Dex is a marketing and communication tool to help connect with the players by publishing contents on tablets, TV monitors and LED screens throughout a location, both inside and outside in a simple but effective way and very fast too. The most important

benefit is its ability to segment promotions by time, location or by metrics, cross-selling, upselling products and one-to-one communication through interactive apps.

Finally, there is the Sacoa Online Store. This is a new and easier way to order Sacoa equipment and parts. It allows the operator to check the latest items and newest releases, follow up their last order to show its progress and quickly receive all that they may need to avoid any interruption of business.

Novelties? Certainly not. More of an example of careful thought about what would help an operator.

It is clearly the upshot of considerable experience because Sacoa operates 17 FECs of its own in the Mar del Plata holiday coast in Argentina, where it gains much of its behind-the-scenes information on trends and, quite simply, what would help the operator to make their life easier and improve their business.

There is no greater inside information than that gained from personal experience and much of that will be on show on booth number 7-S160 at the World Trade Centre in Dubai.



Sacoa director Pol Mochkovsky (second left) and the team at IAAPA 2018

If you missed the latest amusement show, here are the **highlights**



SPARK



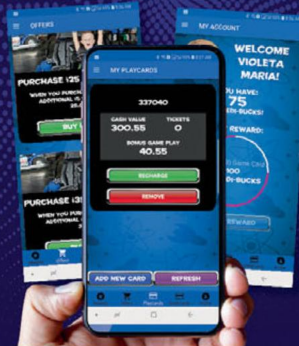
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KIOSK



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Esports: it's in the game

Quality content drives Hologate's LBVR game and allows it to get established in the world of competitive gaming

FOLLOWING on from last month's issue, in which Hologate PR head and key account manager Jürgen Kayser spoke about the German VR pioneer's view on the Middle East market, here he updates us on what most consider to be the aspect on which the success or failure of the technology rests - its content - and how this helps Hologate push into the realms of esports.

The success of yet another home-grown Hologate title, *Groove Guardians*, introduced late last year, proves that not all games need to be based around expensive IPs, but in an ideal world, both should be able to sit alongside each other and maximise the profitability of a platform. That's exactly what's happening with Hologate.

"With an in-house dev team of 15 full-time employees and several freelance contributors, we have a constant output of exclusive games," said Kayser, "which are specifically designed for the attributes of the Hologate. Since the start of 2017, we are now close to releasing the sixth game, designed by our team.

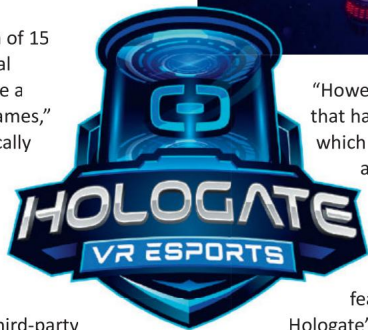
"Besides that, we are expanding our integration of third-party content, which underlines the fact that the Hologate is a dynamic platform for distributing the best location-based VR content on the market."

Kayser said that the Hologate team has multiple titles from external publishers on its road map, which broadens its catalogue and thus attracts different target groups and returning customers.

"It's the mix of both channels, which guarantees a constant supply of new content, uses the experience from our team but at the same time allows external visions to be integrated into the Hologate cosmos."

Having already scored with the capture of the *Angry Birds* licence, Kayser said that the company's search for the expansion of its catalogue mix is continuing. "We are close to announcing the next big IP for one of our upcoming titles and this effort won't change in the near future. IPs are a good way to gather trust on all sides, that your final product or content has a high degree of quality.

"Publishers and brand owners are always interested in having their IP shown in the best possible way. So the decision to give away their licence is also proof that they acknowledge your business vita and trust in your expertise. For the operator, IPs are a good tool to attract customers, as they are showing recognisable content, which enhances the individual's entertainment experience."



"However, it's the whole catalogue that has to convince the consumer, which means your original games are as important. Because they are the significant titles, which represent your overall product and also have to highlight the best features of your attraction."

Hologate's next in-house title is *Holo Slam*. Currently under development and as yet without an official release date, it is expected to be rolled out at some point in Q2. As it is still in the prototype stage, Kayser couldn't share any images, but told us that it is a futuristic, four-player sports title drawing on aspects of tennis combined with the old-school arcade classic *Breakout*.

Players have to throw and catch an energised disc. Aiming at targets on specific tiles, they will have to play strategically to get the upper hand on opponents.

The nature of *Holo Slam*, like other games designed by Hologate, lends itself perfectly to being played competitively between locations, online, which of course opens up all manner of esports possibilities. This is something that, of course, is not lost on Kayser.

"We are now preparing the execution of our international Hologate VR esports tournaments. For the first iteration, our rhythm-music game, *Groove Guardians* is the perfect candidate to introduce the fan base to our long-term series of different tournaments featuring all relevant games from our catalogue.

"Because of its highly intuitive gameplay and immersive VR experience, *Groove Guardians* has the best potential to offer players the prospect of striving for the global high score - something that spectators too will be drawn to."

All of Hologate's 200-plus locations worldwide will be offered the opportunity to host their

individual events, which work as qualification rounds for what Hologate bills as the "first global virtual reality esports tournament in history." The best teams from all around the world will be invited to participate at the finals, the venue and format of which are currently being finalised.

"As of now we are still working on undisclosed enhancements for the finals, but one detail we can already share is that to become the best player on Earth, the competitors not only have to achieve the highest score on the leaderboard, they also have to do this with style!"

As for the future of the sector and its relationship with tournaments, Kayser said: "As we are in an early stage, witnessing the evolving relationship of VR games and esports, it's tough to predict the outcome in the next decade and how different concepts will form this branch in VR.

"But one thing is for sure; this is a huge opportunity to boost the location-based entertainment business in general and use virtual reality as a powerful PR tool.

"At all our recent shows and events in the last year we had multiple content production teams from different kinds of news or lifestyle organisations reporting from our Hologate. Lots of celebrities and famous sports professionals have been playing the Hologate voluntarily and posting this on their social media channel.

"Since the first prototype of our platform, we not only wanted to create an awesome experience for the player but we wanted to represent the playing field in such a way that makes it visually attractive and thus useful for sharing everyone's own story in a sensational way. This then attracts the attention of passing people of all ages.

"The bottom line is that the marketing potential of VR is promising to establish a new era for FECs - and VR."

Comprehensive line-up from Sega

DEAL line-up demonstrates full versatility

HAVING made the pledge last month that industry principal Sega will play its part in helping the Middle East FECs back to “normal” after an indifferent 2018, company CEO Paul Williams outlined some of the products that it would take to the DEAL show.

They all, said Williams, will go through Middle East distributor Amusement Services International, Prakash Vivekanand’s Dubai-based company. “ASI continues to do a super job for us in its region. I would say that it is one of our top worldwide distributors now because of the standards of service and support that ASI gives to customers. ASI sets the standards that the rest of the world’s distributors need to follow.”

Williams said that his organisation had yet to commit itself on virtual reality. “We distribute Virtual Rabbids, the attendant-free game from LAI, but it is a rather different product from the VR that we generally see at trade shows. We are observing what is going on, but we have not yet become involved. We have not found a platform that is suitable for operators. Some companies have good platforms but not good software; others can offer the reverse. We have yet to find one that can offer both with the exception of Rabbids.

“It is still early days. I saw some degree of change suggested at the IAAPA show that might

indicate that some people are making the right noises, but I would not commit myself or the company yet.”

Equally, Williams said that he was “not yet ready to write it off” as a long-term anchor attraction for the amusement industry. His company has the distribution rights to Virtual Rabbids in Europe and South America, while ASI has it for the Middle East and Harry Levy distributes the game in the UK.

“There continues to be some amazing statistics coming out of Virtual Rabbids operation in premium sites in North America,” he added. “And it appears that it is fresh money - it’s not taking from the games around it.”

All of these games, he said, would make their presence felt in the Middle East market in 2019. “It had a difficult year in 2018,” said Williams. “But it remains bullish and I expect it to begin to pull back in 2019. It may not make it back to 2017 levels, but by the end of this year I expect it to be half-way to full recovery.”

Williams and his team, led by Maria Carmen Villarroya, who has direct responsibility for international sales, will have a formidable line-up of product to offer the industry at the World Trade Centre when it opens its doors on March 25.

Ball Runner, House of the Dead: Scarlet Dawn, Transformers: Shadows Rising, Magic Arrow, Daytona Championship USA, Hoopla, ATV Slam and Pixel Chase, will offer as representative a cross-section of product for almost all sectors of coin-op that it is possible to have under one brand name.

Pixel Chase is a new skill-based ticket redemption game in a brightly lit LED cabinet in which players throw as many balls into the 4x4 LED-lit target holes within the time limit. It is an intuitive skill-based fun experience that naturally leads players to want another go. Effectively, it is a “modern retro” theme but with bright pixels.

Ball Runner is another redemption with classic overtones. Rolling mechanics are combined with a digital lighting matrix, the player sliding balls along runners up the playfield to hit lit targets and score points.

Magic Arrow is another skill game, the player aiming the arrow at a target spinning wheel, trying to strike one of eight slots, each numbered and relating to the prize. It is a game that is simple to grasp but engenders in the player a desire to try again.

The big two games, of course, are Transformers: Shadows Rising and Daytona Championship USA. The latter, in its various manifestations, has been a mainstay of Sega’s success for many years. The 42ins monitor version is designed to fit comfortably into more locations than the inaugural version and that smaller footprint and lower height still delivered the game that won an IAAPA Brass Ring Award.



Hoopla, one of the hit games of 2018/9, pictured at the London show

The iconic Hornet car themed marquee in racing sponsored graphics and bright LED edge lighting has already proved to be an excellent ROI.

Few produce driving games like Sega, as Daytona proves and Transformers: Shadows Rising has already won over the crowds at the fall EAS show, IAAPA and at the European EAG. Co-releasing with the movie *Bumblebee*, the game’s cabinet takes the shape of Optimus Prime in his truck mode. The dedicated driving game follows Transformers: Human Alliance, and again is licensed from Hasbro.

House of the Dead: Scarlet Dawn is another sequel with the expected horror theme. It has Unreal Engine 4 game graphics and a 55ins monitor. Developed in Japan, the game gives an immersive, five-dimensional full body experience with surround sound.

ATV Slam is a quad bike racing game with an all-terrain vehicle and a custom motion platform to add realism. There are 10 exotic environments and five different vehicles and it has the added wind-in-the-face effects.

It was, as Paul Williams said last month, a year of Hoopla in 2018. It was an instant hit at IAAPA, where the carnival-style game is always appreciated by the crowds. The skill redemption game sees players toss hoops on all seven hooks within the given time to progress to a bonus round. The simplicity of the game is matched by a brightly lit cabinet and a conveyor belt that constantly feeds the player with more hoops. As it has a lowered wide playfield, the game permits parents and children to team up to win together.

The saying “something for everyone” is often overused, but Sega might be forgiven for suggesting that the variety in its DEAL line-up covers just about every facet of today’s FEC games necessities and does so with comprehensive quality.



Top trio of games for Dubai

Adrenaline's line-up set to impress

BLOX Breaker, Tomb Raider and Rabbids Hollywood will give a great deal of colour and diversity to the Warehouse of Games booth - one of the largest at DEAL - as the exhibition opens its doors to the Middle East industry.

The Adrenaline top-line games are now going to be coming out of a new state-of-the-art factory, beginning with Blox Breaker, at Terrebonne, on the outskirts of Montreal, Canada, newly-acquired by brother-partners Francois and David Lachance. That formidable team is joined by Frank Ballouz, one of the best-known names in the international amusement coin machine fraternity and who is very familiar with the Middle East industry.

And that combination is further supplemented by long-time distribution outfit and firm friends Nabil Kassim and Yuhannis Nawasreh, the team that runs the major regional machine supply business out of Dubai.

Said Francois Lachance: "Nabil has built up a world-class distribution organisation that can handle anything from FEC design, machine distribution and after sales and does so with consummate passion and efficiency. They have a state-of-the-art facility at the hub of the region's FEC business and they bring to the market some of the top-line games with a support team that will ensure that operators get the best return on investment possible."

They operate, said Frank Ballouz, in "one of the strongest regions in the world, but also one of the most demanding." He added: "The industry in the Middle East is now extremely professional and very, very knowledgeable; it has to be as its customers are among the most demanding too. We know that we have to be at the very top of our game to succeed there and it is a tribute to our games developers in Canada and the efficiency of the set-up there, that we have been so successful in the region."

Global redemption games trends, said Lachance, is firmly in the grip of redemption. "It remains very strong. Players are looking for fresh challenges to test their abilities, but they also want something tangible to show for their efforts and that is why ticket redemption coupled with a strong game, is still paramount. One way or another it is all about winning."

"If there are any noticeable trends it is that games are tending towards becoming more social - and that means a more receptive market for multiplayer games. Having friends challenging one-another is a movement within the business that is now clear. They like the competition; to see who can come out on top."

Frank Ballouz will be joined by Mehdi Eghbal as DEAL gets under way. They will be capitalising on the success in recent months of Rabbids Hollywood in the Middle East market. The four-player, 120ins monitor friendly arcade shooter has been very popular with kids in family entertainment centres for its casual fun characteristics. A shooting plunger is always fun and now there is a smaller version with a 65ins screen that will take the game into more locations where space is an issue.

Blox Breaker is the current new game. A classic skill device with a unique and somewhat magical twist, Blox Breaker was a big draw at IAAPA and then subsequently at the London EAG show. The player throws balls at different targets that appear on the screen. As soon as a ball touches the screen it continues its trajectory into the digital realm, but maintaining its speed. With the right degree of propulsion and direction of aim, the player can reach the targets. Two players can compete side-by-side to test who has the better pitch and strike the most targets.

A smaller version of the hugely popular video game Tomb Raider that has done so well with its gigantic screen and interactive play, is also now available,

again with 65ins monitor, yet still available for four players. The same screen size is also now ready for Rabbids. The object in this downsizing availability remains to optimise the footprint capabilities of the games.

The range underscores Adrenaline's philosophy, to focus on the fun factor in amusement machines, ensuring that a game delivers action and enjoyment and guarantees a smile. The integration of technologies with eye-catching branding and stimulating gameplay provide the key to success.

The industry has to stay tuned with Adrenaline, said the company. It is promising more soon. In fact "the next generation of redemption and video games," no less.



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Bringing something new to the market

TAB Austria unveils new digital jukebox

A SURPRISING number of locations throughout the Middle East use jukeboxes and that is why Austria's TAB is planning to go to the DEAL show with its brand new Max Fire HD+ digital jukebox.

"There is a huge number of expats in the Gulf region," said the company's CEO, Thomas Stoyer. "They will tend to gather in places that other expats frequent, so that you have a concentration of non-locals. With Max Fire HD+ they can download the music that they like the most and stream it straight into the location."

The Max Fire HD+ in its latest version can offer the largest online music and video library in the amusement industry, said the company. It will adapt to songs and artists most relevant to the venue and reflect the unique musical tastes of the location's clients.

It has many add-on attributes not normally found in jukeboxes. The Max Fire HD+ can even be operated via a mobile app so that the user does not have to cross the floor to the jukebox to make their selections; they use the Music&Fun app. At the operator's end there is online terminal management that adds flexibility in the form of a range of features to ramp up efficiency.

The Max Fire HD music database will offer literally hundreds of thousands of music and video titles going back almost 100 years, but also all the top charts from a number of countries, which are updated on a weekly basis.

There is a 32ins touch display flat framed with LED lighting that changes colour to attract attention, but can also be adjusted.

Stoyer's colleague, export sales director Ingemar Kroiss, said that in addition to the Max Fire HD+ the company would also send its well-known and very successful Fun4Four Game Table to the show. Shaped like a tall cocktail table with a giant 42ins horizontal screen, up to six players can choose between a host of games from a specially-selected package. The Fun4Four is an ideal addition to any bar, pub, restaurant, hotel lobby, casinos and many more places.

"At the moment we have 75 games on the table," said Kroiss. "And we have 10 more games coming this year."

They said that they would be going to the Middle East to seek distribution for their products across the region.

"The Fun4Four is a unique product," said Thomas Stoyer. "It can be used as a standard dining table and you can play games in addition. The German market on



Thomas Stoyer (right) and Ingemar Kroiss, pictured at the recent London EAG show. They are pictured with the Fun4Four table, with the jukebox on the wall to the rear of the stand

its own took more than 1,000 units during 2018, but the table is currently sold to many European countries in high numbers."

The company is best known for its gambling products. More than 30,000 sports betting terminals are working across Europe and other parts of the world that came from the company's Austrian factory.

"But we have these excellent products for the non-gambling market too," said Stoyer. "The Max Fire and the Fun4Four have been on the market for some years now and we have constantly upgraded and improved both of them to the point where we felt that they should be made available more widely. The Middle East offers little in the way of prospect for the gambling products, but these two are ideal."

The Fun4Four Game Table has a number of features including the ability to be configured for up to six people to play together at any one time. The games package can be tailored to suit the players, the location or the local regulations - important in the Middle East. The games can be controlled from a mobile phone and at the table itself the players use a 42ins multi-touchscreen. For the operator there is online terminal management.

"We believe that there is an opportunity in the Middle East for these two machines," said Stoyer. "There are locations there that would benefit from them and we know that there is a core of expat and even local players who would enjoy something that most of them have probably never seen before."



IGPRODUCTS

IN DEVELOPMENT OR READY FOR MARKET

MARVEL CONTEST OF CHAMPIONS: RAW THRILLS/KABAM

CO-PARTNERED by Dave and Buster's, the Marvel Contest of Champions video game has now been officially launched in the US. All 122 Dave and Buster's locations across North America are set to offer the game, a 2D beat 'em-up offering character cards to collect in the vein of Injustice Arcade. One of the main differences with this new release is that it uses joysticks rather than buttons, while players can collect over 70 Champions Cards with more to be added. The game is co-developed by Raw Thrills and Kabam, the maker of the original mobile app, which debuted in 2014 and features icons from across the Marvel universe including The Avengers, The Defenders, X-Men, Inhumans and Guardians of the Galaxy.



BULL RUNNER: VIRTUIX

THE 20th game for the Omniverse, the cloud-based content distribution and arcade management platform included with each Omni motion platform and VR Arena attraction, is Bull Runner. Bull Runner is a simulation of the famous running of the bulls event in Pamplona, Spain, and requires players to compete for the highest score by running as close to the bulls as they can without getting gored. The game highlights the Omni's key features, offering the ability to physically run in VR. Developed by Virtuix, the Omniverse gaming platform has now hit over one million plays. Omniverse is the cloud-based content distribution and arcade management platform included with each Omni motion platform and VR Arena attraction. All games on Omniverse are optimised both for the Omni and for location-based entertainment. Virtuix has shipped more than 3,000 Omni units to date to over 500 LBE locations in 45 countries. "We've learned a lot about the requirements of operating VR in location-based entertainment," said Jan Goetgeluk, Virtuix's founder and CEO. "Our first foray into the FEC market, a stage-style product with five Omnis placed in a small area, had suboptimal throughput, flow, and labour costs. Two years of customer feedback helped us to design our new attraction, VR Arena, with highly-automated user flow, built-in esports and a selection of the best Omniverse games." Virtuix launched its Omniverse content platform in late 2017.



SKEE-BALL CARNIVAL: BAY TEK

BAY Tek Entertainment has launched Skee-Ball Carnival, an improved version of the classic alley game. It made its debut at Gibtown, the largest carnival trade show in the US, organised by the International Independent Showmen's Foundation. "We got a lot of great interest in the game at the show. This is a brand that's not going anywhere, in fact it's getting stronger, despite it being 110 years old," said Jeff Hudson, account manager at Bay Tek. Since the acquisition in 2016, Bay Tek has been reviving the Skee-Ball brand while purposefully maintaining its original integrity. From a product development standpoint, significant improvements have been made to both the quality and service support of all Skee-Ball games. The rail lighting has been enhanced, making it ideal for nighttime operation. Other enhancements include the ball-chase LED technology that follows the ball up the ramp when thrown, an effect that didn't exist on the original lanes, plus it's now constructed out of durable, marine-grade plywood to hold up to the harsh elements faced by carnival operators. "We made significant changes to the Skee-Ball lane with the carnival market in mind," said Hudson. "We know durability, dependability and striking aesthetics are crucial to this group, and we made enhancements to address all of those areas. The new alley has been designed to be retrofitted into most existing Skee-Ball trailers, so upgrading shouldn't be a problem."



CASHCOMPLETE CONNECT RETAIL EDITION: SUZOHAPP

SUZOHAPP has launched CashComplete Connect Retail Edition. The software and hardware payment management systems company said that the new extension to its CashComplete Connect range has been designed specifically for retail payments management. Retail Edition automates the entire retail payment process from payment acquisition to reconciliation. It offers real-time visibility, advanced analytics, reconciliation and general ledger integration. It is already operating successfully with one major retailer with hundreds of outlets worldwide that requested a reliable system to give complete visibility to and proactive management of its complex payment operations. "Having walked with one of our largest retail customers through the implementation of Retail Edition, I've witnessed first-hand what a great investment this is for our customers," said Ron Partridge, president of SuzoHapp Americas. "They've realised significant improvements in productivity, significant reduction in shrinkage, real-time visibility into their cash positions across machines and locations, and operations have streamlined their audit functions and reporting processes."



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FOCUS

HOT SELLERS IN
BETSON'S LINE-UP



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HALO: FIRETEAM RAVEN TWO-PLAYER

RAW Thrills, in collaboration with Play Mechanix and 343 Industries, has released a two-player version of Halo: Fireteam Raven. The two-player version takes part in the events of the original Halo: Combat Evolved storyline from an all-new perspective - the ODST soldiers of Fireteam Raven. Players are tasked with providing cover fire and mission assistance for Master Chief and defeating fan-favourite enemies like the Covenant and Flood.

SPINS AHOY!

THE latest game from Team Play is the nautical-themed Spins Ahoy! Player bonuses are achieved by landing on special treasure chest tiles or activating the bonus multiplier after starting the competitive progressive bonus feature. Available in Pinball or Spinner versions, Spins Ahoy! aims to "capture the spirit of adventure and imagination of all ages while filling your cashbox with bountiful booty."



SUPERBIKES 3 Copyright 2019 Raw Thrills, Inc. All rights reserved.

SUPER BIKES 3

NEW from Raw Thrills is Super Bikes 3, the latest iteration of the high-earning motorcycle racing franchise. Redesigned from the ground up, Super Bikes 3 features all-new cabinetry with a bolder, more aggressive look, as well as five all-new tracks, eight bikes, eight unique riders and it up to eight machines can be linked. The series originally debuted in 2006, with the second game arriving in 2010.

TOTAL ECLIPSE

TOTAL Eclipse from Benchmark Games is a 100 per cent skill-based game for one to four players. Players test their skills by sending the play puck twisting and turning along a cosmic pathway onto a spinning wheel, aiming to land it dead centre on celestial win zone targets. Covering the stars with the puck will result in a win that corresponds to displayed ticket values. Total Eclipse features a rotating marquee, a custom audio package and is card swipe capable.



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HURRAH! Due to a superhuman effort, we got ahead of ourselves this month and produced this issue of *InterGame* early. The cunning plan was that by publishing ahead of our normal schedule we could get this April magazine to the major DEAL trade show in Dubai.

Our coverage includes the second part of our Middle East report, a review of one of the world's most progressive and expanding amusement markets.

A close look at some of the developments taking place in that region leaves many of the FEC sector projects in Europe and North America looking positively third world.

This month focuses again on what's likely

to happen in Saudi Arabia, but also explores some fresh horizons for the big players in that region, along the Mediterranean coast of North Africa and down deeper into Africa, as far as Kenya.

These geographical regions are now becoming acknowledged as the natural stamping ground for the big operators of the UAE and Saudi. And there is the odd hint that they may extend their brands into Europe in the near future.

Those involved in the international amusement machine industry would do well to take a long, hard look at what is coming out of that part of the world, for those operators are no longer following; they are leading.

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InterGame

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SPECIAL ISSUE
APRIL 2019





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The byword for great entertainment

WHEN Saudi families go to a family entertainment centre for some fun, they don't say "let's go to the FEC," they say "let's go to an Al Hokair" - even when their nearest FEC is not one of the Al Hokair Group locations.

It is a little like someone saying that they will "Hoover the carpet," when their vacuum cleaner is another brand.

That is how much the Al Hokair group of attractions and entertainment brands is so familiar in its home territory. The group is now fast-approaching 100 locations, with most of them in the kingdom, but several also in neighbouring Egypt and the UAE.

There is likely to be more destinations coming up, according to the comments in this, the fourth annual Al Hokair Special Issue of *InterGame*. The issue also discusses the great challenges facing the company - and the opportunities - emerging from the Vision 2030 programme in Saudi Arabia.

The region's largest FEC group has much to say this year, possibly making it one of the most significant in the company's history.



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A whole new world

THE man charged with leading the Middle East's biggest FEC operating company into the most challenging year in the region's history, seems very unfazed at the prospect.

Mishal Al Hokair has been at the epicentre of the Saudi group's groundbreaking initiatives since he took control of the entertainment division.

Now the door has been opened to fierce competition by major operators from outside of the kingdom, capitalising on the new-found freedoms being delivered to the 25 million Saudis, with entertainment a fundamental component. The cinema industry alone will electrify and transform entertainment in the country and it is generally being presented as part of new "destinations" opening up for wider leisure.

Retail, restaurants, family entertainment centres, they are all in the mix of this new recipe for keeping Saudis - and their disposable income - at home instead of flowing out to other countries in the Gulf region. Amusement parks are opening and at the same time women are being empowered, finding jobs and female-only entertainment centres.

From a position only five years ago of dominating the Saudi scene with 50-plus parks and FECs, and the nearest challenger operating a fraction of that number, Al Hokair has suddenly found itself in a new world. But it has not come entirely unexpectedly. Mishal Al Hokair and his team have anticipated each fresh move in the developing Saudi scene and have adjusted its business to cater for every nuance as they have appeared.

To begin with the 50-plus locations of five years ago are now over 90, as the group has

taken its talents and its products to fresh green field sites within Saudi Arabia itself and into other parts of the Middle East. As competitors have lined up to enter Saudi and challenge the Al Hokair supremacy, Al Hokair has taken the initiative into their competitors' own territories. At the same time, Mishal Al Hokair has built on the foundations laid by his brother, Majed, who controlled the group's entertainments division prior to his elevation to new challenges in the wider hospitality interests of Al Hokair Group.

Perhaps the boldest step of all was Mishal's decision to go truly avant garde and divorce entertainment from retail. This was a major departure from the accepted norm of FEC development in the Middle East. A stand-alone destination resort-style FEC, known appropriately as Al Hokair Time, has been an outstanding success. The initial Riyadh location has now been supplemented by several more Al Hokair Time venues, comprising the leading FEC amusement brand Sparky's, with the franchised American SkyZone trampoline product and Hokair's own-developed soft play Snowy Forest. Add into the mix some cutting-edge brand names in food and beverage and the combination has proved electrifying.

"We have always had competition but now we are getting competitors from outside of Saudi. I see this as an advantage for us; it sharpens our focus, makes us very aware of every aspect of our business and the need to ensure that we stay ahead of the game if we want to remain leaders."



One has the feeling that only three years into the job, Mishal Al Hokair is rather relishing the new challenges he faces.

"There are now more opportunities in Saudi Arabia and cinema is just one of them. These opportunities are opening up new avenues for us, but also for our competition. We have always had competition but now we are getting competitors from outside of Saudi. I see this as an advantage for us; it sharpens our focus, makes us very aware of every aspect of our business and the need to ensure that we stay ahead of the game if we want to remain leaders."

The country's economy, said Mishal Al Hokair, had led to some difficulties for all businesses, including the entertainment industry, from late 2017 and through 2018, but he felt that improvement was on the way. "Our observations suggest that Saudi will see our industry in particular showing growth this year. We have to take advantage of this growth - and of the increased pressure from competition - to keep thinking outside of the box."

He said that one of the milestones for the company had come in 2018, when Al Hokair was one of only four operators to be given cinema licences in the country. "I don't think that any more will be issued in the short-term. I think that the authorities will see how these four operators proceed and evaluate them before deciding whether more licences should be issued."

He said that the group would open 300 screens over the next five years, some of them in existing locations and others in new venues. "We plan to open more Al Hokair Time locations and some of them will be bigger to take advantage of the opportunity to introduced cinemas in them - and other new projects."

He confirmed that the Al Hokair Time concept would be expanded and that new ideas - in addition to cinemas - would be introduced. "As part of our plan to combat fresh competition, we need to be much more self-analytical, looking closely at the overall experience of our guests, from the moment that they park their car outside of Al Hokair Time to their experience inside, through the entertainment concepts available in the building, to the food and beverage options, the seating areas and right through to them exiting back to their cars. Every aspect must come under scrutiny and evaluated to see if



Al Hokair Group's deputy CEO and general manager of its entertainment division, Mishal Al Hokair

there is any more we can do to make the overall experience better.”

Fresh thinking was going into the “new concepts,” he said, that the company was evaluating and that they include virtual reality and augmented reality. “We are working with providers on the first openings of these technologies. But we are also working on every other aspect of our business. This year we will focus far more on our food and beverage options, the public areas, etc.”

“It is all part of our vision to stay ahead of the game. We have always had a reputation for being pioneers - Al Hokair Time shows that - in Saudi and it is a momentum that we want to exploit.”

He said that the areas being considered by his team included online gaming and physical activities, both of which may form part of the new concepts under consideration at this time.

“It is all part of our vision to stay ahead of the game. We have always had a reputation for being pioneers - Al Hokair Time shows that - in Saudi and it is a momentum that we want to exploit. People don’t just say that they want to visit an FEC, they say that they want to visit Al Hokair and everyone knows what they mean. It is rather like saying you will Hoover the carpet, when you may have another brand of vacuum cleaner! It is all about reputation and public conception. We are regarded as the byword in entertainment in Saudi and that is a position we will maintain.”

The year, he said, would also see Al Hokair Group look carefully at its own “housekeeping.” Quality control, training, human resources, logistics, will all come under special focus in the year. “There is so much going on behind the scenes; it isn’t all about the final product but about the road to get there, the journey; we have to look at how we do what we do.”

Another part of that, he said, was corporate social responsibility. “We want to make sure that our people are very happy to work for us. Most companies here in Saudi Arabia will provide a salary and a mosque. We want to do more than that. We want to ensure that our staff feel fulfilled not just in their everyday job but in their work environment too. We will encourage them to play sports in their own time, to mix and socialise with one-another.

“We will also work closely with the authorities on the way that women are empowered now in Saudi - you will have spoken with our human resources people on that subject - but we regard it as very important. We want a minimum of 20 Saudis in our maintenance department by the end of 2019 as supervisors and managers. We are going to pioneer in another sense too, with a new group of what some people describe as ‘disabled’ but I prefer to call ‘people of determination.’ We want to see them enter our operational team during the year and become supervisors and managers too.”

They will probably become part of the scene at the new-style Al Hokair Time locations that are planned by the group. Mishal Al Hokair was not



One of the successful Al Hokair Time locations



Sparky, the firefly corporate mascot of the company’s FEC brand, greets visitors to the groups’ offices in Dammam

being drawn on specifics at this stage, beyond confirmation that some of the new locations will contain cinema complexes. He mysteriously added “and at least one other major new project” but was not prepared to explain more.

The new venues, he said, would not always be stand-alone but the company would continue to develop new entertainment concepts both within the retail environment and as stand-alone.

It was one of the features made apparent at the IAAPA show in Orlando in late November, when the company broke with tradition and had its own booth there for the first time. “We had two objectives,” he said. “We wanted a focal point at which to meet and engage with people and to underline who we are, where we are and what we do.

“It is also true that we are ready to franchise our brands into other countries and the booth meant that we would have a meeting point

for potential clients. I can say that we made a number of contacts there and at this moment (mid-December 2018) we have several sets of negotiations going on to see our brands being franchised - and they include the possibility of the brands appearing outside of the Middle East.”

Sparky himself (the firefly corporate mascot of the company’s FEC brand) then, he admitted, “has a passport!”

That is only one of the elements of Al Hokair Group’s plans for 2019 - the other goals remain a concentration on quality, IT and F and B. The challenges for the year are not being underestimated by Mishal Al Hokair but neither are they proving to be the source of concern. He remains upbeat, confident that with one of the industry’s best support teams, the Al Hokair Group will achieve much, if not all, of his ambitions for the year.

Exciting times for Al Hokair - and for Saudi Arabia

TWELVE months ago, Al Hokair Group deputy general manager Ahmed Ebid went on the record with a company target of 120 FEC or similar attraction locations by 2020. Is he keeping with this target as we move deeper into 2019?

"Yes. We have now passed 97 locations and we are sticking to the objective of 120 during that year. We are now in the course of expediting our portfolio and if we don't make that number by or during the target year, then we will be close to it."

Ebid, the number two to Mishal Al Hokair, leads a highly experienced team and knows that it's not all about numbers. "We are not seeking 120 locations, we want 120 *successful* locations - big difference! We could simply expand and add further venues, but if they are not adding value, to us, to our customers and to our shareholders, then it is no good to anyone. We want *productive* added value for everyone's sake."

Ahmed Ebid is typical of the new breed of top executives at the Al Hokair Group, driven by a need to be better; better than what they have right now, better than their competitors and, above all, they appear to know how to do it.

"We know that what works here in Saudi may not work elsewhere within the Middle East and beyond. We have a constant quest to improve. We are studying players' behaviour and not just those taking active part in the rides and games, but also those who have brought them to our location - the parents, the grandparents, the nannies or siblings. What they do and what they say is vitally important to us; they indicate the trends, sometimes before they become trends. We know that those trends are constantly evolving."

"We watch which rides the children choose to experience and we can state immediately that what they were choosing two or three years ago is not always what they are choosing now. They constantly seek new attractions and if we are to stay ahead of our game we have to provide them. If virtual reality is what our customers are asking for then we have to provide it as part of our offering."

"Perhaps two or three years from now those attractions will be out of date. It means that we have to be constantly dynamic in our responses, keep alert to trends and meet expectations."

"We will continue to be proactive and keep moving forward in customer service, our selection of rides and games, in business development and in all areas, because the competition is watching and seeking an opening. We know that we have to be more savvy than them."

The entire team at Al Hokair, from Mishal Al Hokair down to staff on the floor of Sparky's or Snowy Forest, know that the Saudi market is opening up to entertainment - and that means competitors. It is as important to them as it is to Mishal Al Hokair, Ahmed Ebid and their senior managers to retain their number one status. "We will continue to be proactive and keep moving forward in customer service, our selection of rides and games, in business development and in all areas, because the competition is watching and seeking an opening. We know that we have to be more savvy than them."

The group came up with Al Hokair Time, the stand-alone destination divorced from retail and containing Sparky's, Snowy Forest and SkyZone with a clutch of supporting food and beverage offerings, party rooms, etc. That arrested the attention of the entire market and not just in the Middle East. How do you top that?

"We have a completely new concept on the way - no, not just an addition to Al Hokair Time. We have another stand-alone. We have signed a deal with Immotion and you will see the results this year. At IAAPA in Orlando, Mishal Al Hokair signed an agreement with Immotion to open four VR centres across Saudi and the UAE, and that is just for starters."

Each will start with 12 machines in an annex to Al Hokair Time but the option is there to go entirely independent with them. "With so little VR in Saudi right now this will make a major impact."

He noted that VR has been introduced to the wider Middle East market in some numbers already. "The difference has been the varying quality. Some malls have two or three machines and are selling an experience. But we are considerably different in our outlook because we are an international provider of FEC experiences, and it is not a transient novelty. We want to see a VR concept that is unique and we are investing a considerable amount of time and money in making sure that the offering is enhanced."

"After a while, these 'pop-up' attractions will disappear in face of the kind of offerings we will provide. It is all like anything else; you will find a lot of ill-prepared and unqualified offers in the marketplace but the ones that will survive will be those that target the right customers, provide the quality and maximise the co-operation with the right technologies."

His view is that the company has to get to the marketplace quickly, be first, but without rushing the final product as that will only make players not come back. "If you take your time, do your research and development properly, you will have a stable product with longevity."

But he does not lose sight of the more traditional entertainments. "Nothing beats a carousel that is 100 years old or even more and the ride is still popular today. Bumper cars, rides, roller coasters won't ever become old. The joy derived from these rides will endure."

The Al Hokair management team has almost an obsession with customer service and intends to improve on it yet further this year. "It is always one of those things that we seek to improve," said Ebid. "We will focus on training and quality development; in health and safety and ride operating proficiency, in coin machine management, in redemption and merchandise quality. Every area in our operation is on the road map."

There are also plans to take the group further in other territories, Ebid noting other parts of



Ahmed Ebid, Al Hokair Group deputy general manager



the GCC and in Egypt. "The most important part of our expansion plans is the choice of the right location to keep our pace in the market. We already have a presence in Saudi and the UAE, but we are now looking also at Bahrain and Oman."

Other projects include the Kora Arena that should be open as this issue goes to press; a sportainment project with beaches indoor and outdoor, football, basketball and food and beverage. "We want to add a new concept every two or three years."

And cinemas? The opening up of the Saudi market to cinemas - or more properly, the reopening of the market - found Al Hokair in the front rank of licence applications, partnering with Cinopolis with a 31 per cent share in a new Saudi cinemas operation. The Mexican movie theatre chain is the world's fourth largest operator and the joint approach by Cinopolis' Saudi offshoot, part-owned by Al Hokair, took the fourth licence to be issued.

Together the consortium will build a range of cinema complexes of differing sizes over the next five years, ranging from the ultra-luxury to kid-friendly auditoriums to venues with 4DX technology and augmented effects such as seat motion, wind and scents.

"We have entered the movie theatre business through a sister company," said Ebid. "There is no reason why FECs should not be attached to cinemas or indeed, that cinemas should form an integral part of an FEC. Many malls have signed deals to bring cinemas into their locations and these deals are not always with Al Hokair, but we will still benefit because it brings footfall into our FEC locations. We have signed deals with some malls to open cinemas alongside our FECs in their malls and equally we are getting into malls where the FEC is not ours but we will have the cinema. It is a good mix of projects. The change in the legislation has enabled us to leverage our position in the most flexible way."

And what about cinemas in the strip-mall style of stand-alone project that forms Al Hokair Time? "Yes, this is on the cards, too. We have plans to

install cinemas there as well. It can only make Al Hokair Time still more complete, consisting of cinema, FEC, F and B and retail outlets. We will start to open this type of venue by the end of 2019 and overall we will aim to have 300 screens open in five years."

Ebid is taking an opposing view to a competitor planning to come into the Saudi cinemas market. He will install games in cinema foyers. While his competitor thinks that games need to be in a room full of them to have traction, Ebid believes that there is a market for cinema-goers waiting for their movie to start. It will be interesting to see how those diametrically opposed views pan out.

He sees the wider view of Vision 2030 the ruler's ambitions to broaden the base of Saudi culture as opening many opportunities for the leisure industry. "Cinemas are just one part of it. The entire entertainment and leisure landscape here is going to go through a huge change. There have been 5,000 events of one type or another in the country over the past year alone, from WWE shows to Cirque de Soleil during our national day. The existence of entertainment activities and the freeing up of leisure in Saudi is a real ground breaker here.

"The Qiddiya project involving a Six Flags amusement park is going to be massive, a one-of-a-kind project and there will be others following it. There is such a myriad of possibilities and opportunities arising in Saudi right now that we find that we are living in very exciting times."

The impact on the average Saudi citizen is going to be perhaps the most fascinating part of Vision 2030. The changes will seem wonderful and already, said Ebid, the reaction of the population "has been incredible." He said: "The Saudi people have embraced the new developments and the positivity has been felt across the board; it's amazing. There has been very little resistance at all."

He noted that this lack of resistance is probably because where change has been affecting daily lives, it has been done with great consideration to Saudi traditions. "As long as

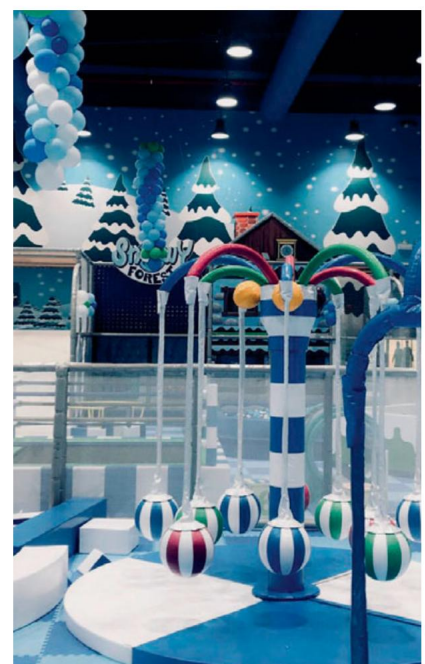
the newly-introduced activities and events are consistent and respectful of the traditions of the people and of the area in which they take place, then there has been little or no objection at all."

As a result, the country's General Entertainment Authority and the entertainment industry itself are both agreed that if the formula is kept then the sky is the limit. "Some of the huge projects that we see in the planning stage will be with us well before 2030."

With all of that in mind, Al Hokair is in a fortunate position. "We are precisely in the business that all of this relates to so it is ours to leverage. This is the competitive advantage that has been presented to us. We have the know-how, we are the market leader, we know our customers. There are so many opportunities here that operators don't actually need to directly compete with one-another. There are FECS for residential areas, theme parks for tourism and other areas and we have an eye on all of them."

Every year is a fresh challenge. The year 2019 is the last before the long-term target of 2020 and the 120 locations. Al Hokair has hit most of its targets in the past few years. On the run-in to the big target the group has to spin many plates, fending off competitors, enhancing customer service, adding on fresh attractions.

It is a tall order... but then we say that every year...



Gosetto - a special relationship

WHEN brothers Elio and Valentino founded the Italian ride maker Gosetto in 1977 they already had 20 years' experience in the field of rides manufacturing - and that means that the company and its forebears have been involved in the industry as a specialist supplier for over 60 years.

These days it is Elio's children, Lisa and Luca, who are joint CEOs and run the company - with Luca the specialist contact person with the Al Hokair Group.

He is more closely involved in the technical and production side of the company, while his sister looks after sales and administration.

The second generation has driven on the expansion of the company, developing its presence in the travelling fairgrounds and amusement parks industry, working from a factory in Treviso. Now they make bumper cars, carousels, rodeos, flying cages, go-karts and tracks, ghost trains and fun houses, dark rides and a host of bespoke designs and constructions.

The foundations of the business, built up by Elio and Valentino have led to a global coverage. Gosetto's products can be found from the Netherlands to Australia and from the UK to Azerbaijan. Some prestige locations can be counted among those customers, including Warner Brothers in Australia, the Prater in Austria and Liseberg in Sweden. The rides can be found in outdoor amusement parks and in family entertainment ride locations.

The contact with Al Hokair goes back 25 years when the company was brought in to build a base bumper car building for an Al



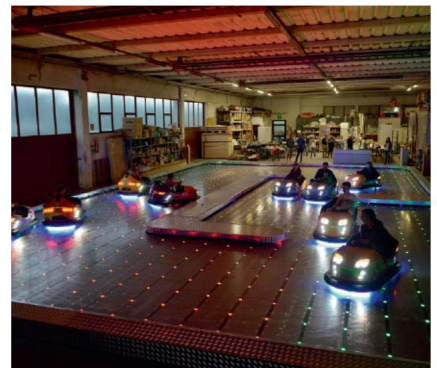
Hokair location in Saudi. In those days, said Luca Gosetto, the company majored on the production of go-kart tracks and bumper car buildings. Since the turn of the century, however, the company has broadened its portfolio of products into a wide range of rides.

Luca and the Gosetto sales manager Andrea Casagrande are the points-of-contact with the Middle East. They ensure that the company provides a total coverage and is particularly intense about its relationship with Saudi's most famous operator. "It is not just a sales relationship," said Luca Gosetto. "It is a 360-degree service to include the supply of spare parts, assistance through the internet and telephone, production of the documentation needed...everything. Our technical office interacts with Al Hokair technicians working in their many locations stretching across the Middle East."

It seems that the bumper car base supplied 25 years ago is still working in Saudi. It was followed by similar orders for bumper car infrastructure and other indoor rides such as the Taga J, Convoys, Party Dance, Tagas, coasters and other products that have gone into the indoor parks of the Al Hokair group in both Saudi and other Gulf countries.

They are, generally, family rides and can be configured for ages as low as two years right up to adult rides. "We try always to balance the right thrill feeling so that we can ensure that the maximum number of people get the right experience; we have always been very conscious of the need for families to ride together and share the same experience."

Luca Gosetto regards the Al Hokair relationship as very much a special and personal one. "Our interaction has grown stronger over the years, always in a transparent and honest way and for this reason we keep our seller-buyer relationship something about which we don't talk. It is simply a partnership in every sense, between two groups, because the success of one is directly connected to the success of the other.



"Of course, Al Hokair is very demanding. This is right and proper and is a testament to their professionalism. They are very keen on high quality, top design standards, passionate on safety and these are fundamentals that are vital to the well-being of a relationship and the reliability of a product.

"Perhaps for that reason Al Hokair does not buy from a catalogue of products. Everything that we do for them is specific, tailor-made, for their requirements. We react to their needs and to their design requests, using their logo and their mascot images everywhere that they want. It all works well, for both of our companies."





Riyadh

- Al Hokair Time
- Al Makan Mall
- Althumamah

Dammam

- Bin Khaldoon Mall
- Alhokair Time

Khobar

- Alhokair Time - Aziziyah
- Alhokair Time - Qurtubah
- AlHokair Time - Cornich

Jeddah

- Red Sea Mall
- Jam'a Plaza

Madinah

- Rashid Mall
- Alhokair Time

Al Ahsa

- Lulu Plaza

AlAhsa

- Lulu Plaza

Makkah

- Al Hokair Time

Taif

- Al Hokair Time

Yanbuh

- Almurouj Plaza

Abha

- Aseer Mall

Jizan

- Rashid Mall

Tabuk

- Makan Mall

Ajman

- City Life Al Khor Mall

'We're setting up for winners'

ALMOST a year after he began his role at Al Hokair, operations director Philippe Andre van der Byl responded to *InterGame's* "How are you?" question, enthusing: "I'm extremely happy!"

He said: "I'm back into operations, which is what I do, and this is the most amazing organisation to be working in. There's lots to do, loads of locations. Al Hokair is the number one leisure company in the region so where else would I rather be than here?"

A positive start.

Van der Byl started his career with HB Leisure in the UK, then went to UAE giant Majid Al Futtaim, also as operations director and working on the Magic Planet brand. A move to Meraas followed, as its leisure and entertainment VP, before he made the switch to Al Hokair.

"There's a great team here," he explained, "well-established and hugely experienced. We're really concentrating on the coin-op side of the business in terms of the type of machines and how we operate them. Our ethos here is in not assuming that machines are simply plug and play but that they need working with, loving and looking after to get the most out of every single swipe.

"We're also revisiting merchandising, where we buy plush and the quality of it, the presentation of our prize counter and the redemption machines themselves and how we set up machines. We're setting up for winners. Winners encourage more winners.

"It's a slow burner. You build solid foundations and we're starting to see its effects. We recently had the MENALAC delegation over and they could see the differences starting to flourish, which is nice because it's competitors and colleagues that I've worked with for a long time in the industry and they witness the results of your hard work, so its nice to see."

Van der Byl explained that the number of people coming through the doors of an FEC is

reliant in some cases on the number of people coming through the doors of the mall its located in, so he and his team have been working hard with them to drive footfall. He said: "You then see your spend spreading and we therefore need to work out a way of developing more loyalty, retaining customers while at the same time generating new ones."

Al Hokair's locations are still predominantly mall based. However, the dynamic is evolving with over 10 of the company's free standing Al Hokair Time locations in operation and more to come. "I like them because they're ours, so we're totally reliant on ourselves. They welcome the local communities and we manage the whole offer. Whereas if we're in a mall, you're reliant on more external factors."

While the brands Al Hokair operates are familiar, Van der Byl said they're always looking for new leisure attractions.

"We have a huge number of ideas and initiatives in development, aquariums being just one. Escape rooms we're doing some more studies on. We like to offer concepts that provide repeat custom and not just a one-off experience, which I feel some escape rooms can be. We're looking at how we develop it for our market.

"If you look at the UAE, for example, the competition there is so fierce there it makes you think harder about what you're putting in and how you can develop loyalty. It's all about loyalty and that's what we're pushing here in Saudi. Even though it's a bigger population, we're segmenting it into communities.

"While we need to have a common operation policy, you still adapt to your environment and market. We have several locations in Riyadh, for example, and while the core drivers for us are the same, to increase footfall, revenue and repeat custom, you still tailor your offer to each specific location dependent on its individual needs.

"When I was at MAF, I found that the local spend was the bread and butter, but the GCC holiday spend from Saudis and Kuwaitis, for



Operations director Philippe Andre van der Byl

example, was what really made the difference."

Trends in FEC equipment are largely similar in Saudi to the rest of the globe; VR, for instance, is starting to have a presence in the kingdom. Van der Byl considers VR to be the new video.

"If you buy redemption, you're buying a machine that will work for you for the next 20 years but with video its very trend oriented and it's the same with VR. At the moment the VR field is moving incredibly fast. By the time you've invested in a product, the next level has already arrived. We have to be involved but have to be cautious. We've signed a deal with Immotion and their product has gone straight into three of our main FECs here and in the Emirates. We're also looking at other VR offers too. You have to have be current and on trend.

"There's not a lot of VR in the kingdom, despite how much was on display at IAAPA last year, but throughout 2019 we'll have a big stab at it. Some of it is entry level and simple but it also crosses over and some iterations are large, stand-alone attractions, so it's about trying to manage what your market will stand. The quality of the content is what is important with VR and that's what we're looking for."

Like most FECs though, the core product for Van der Byl is redemption and that this was not being ignored he said.

"Winners breed winners. We're constantly looking at what people can win. The most popular item at the moment is kettles! Go figure. But if that's what people want to take home with them then, that's what we'll offer, along with iPads and mobile phones, etc. We're also lowering our starting points so we can appeal to the younger kids as well as adults.

"We have to bring out our inner child when we're sourcing new plush lines because we're providing smiles and entertainment. Value for money is key."



There's no business like snow business...

CHANGES are coming to Al Hokair's Snowy Forest concept.

The soft play brand has been very successful, so the Snowy team at Al Hokair, led by Amer J Abouzour, the brand manager, has developed it still further. Now, Snowy Forest is emerging transformed. In effect it is a miniature Al Hokair Time, encompassing soft play, amusement games and rides and trampolines, plus the added educational benefits of small-scale adult play facilities.

The number of Snowy Forest locations has risen from 14 to 20 in the past year, said Abouzour, but the latest ones are rather different from the original development. "We have opened new ones in six malls in the south of Saudi," he said. "The latest is in Sabya in the Jazan region and opened at the end of 2018. This one is the culmination of our redesign plans.

"We are trying to broaden the variety of activities within Snowy Forest and add elements of edutainment."

"We are trying to broaden the variety of activities within Snowy Forest and add elements of edutainment. The adult play element is several cabinets of different professions and jobs that they can play at. This is not the grand-scale adult play as you get in specialist parks; this is an added feature to a location designed for very young children.

"They may find the materials to play at being a nurse or an accountant, or work in a supermarket - the roles vary from location to location. But it will help the children to learn and parents will be able to see the benefits of these new activities."

More soft play elements are being introduced, new features, plus some smaller coin-op (or debit card-operated) games and rides, plus trampolines. It is not just coincidental that soft play, amusement games, rides and trampolines



- scaled down - of the big locations. It fits precisely with what a six-year-old wants and it helps us to push adults and parents into sharing activities with the children."

Snowy has come a long way since the first centre was opened in the Makan Mall in Tabuk in 2016. The next to open will be at Aflaj in Riyadh. All 20 of the current Snowy Forest brand locations are in Saudi Arabia, with the exception of one at Ajman in the UAE, but it may not stop there.

"The industry will have seen that Al Hokair had a stand at the IAAPA show," said Abouzour. "The purpose of that stand was to illustrate who we are and what we do; more importantly, it showed our brands to the world and how they have succeeded. Yes, we are happy to enter into partnerships with operators in other countries and to franchise our brands. We want to see Snowy Forest - and our other concepts - appear elsewhere."

An added responsibility for Amer Abouzour's department is the merchandising of Al Hokair locations. The company has recognised that the quality of prizes distributed through the FECs is critical to the performance of the games on offer. Putting the right merchandise into a crane or on to a display at a prize or ticket redemption centre can improve the cash box of the games immeasurably.

Recognising this, Abouzour has set about ensuring that the right prizes are available for kids with tickets. "If you put something in front of them that is immediately recognisable, such as a Hasbro or Disney character, it will work wonders. We can also develop a range based upon our own brands, Sparky's and Snowy. And the attraction of high-value prizes, electronics or even household goods, is also there. We are investigating all of the available avenues to creating something better.

"We have a policy here at Al Hokair. We like guests to leave one of our locations with a smile on their face and a worthwhile prize in their hands. This is the essence of operating family entertainment centres and is central to the Al Hokair ethos."

make up the familiar elements of an Al Hokair Time giant stand-alone FEC. Recognising the success of this, Abouzour and his team have effectively taken the same elements, scaled them down and joined them with role-play to create a far more interactive Snowy Forest.

The Sabya location is within a small city and is typical of the Saudi localities that Al Hokair has identified as ripe for the benefits of FECs. It is taking the brand into smaller towns and cities that previously had scant family entertainment. Sabya, and the other new locations, will cover between 1,500 and 1,800sq.m.

"The industry is used to seeing Snowy Forest as a soft play add-on to a Sparky's FEC," said Abouzour, "and with a SkyZone trampoline park they form the familiar ingredients of an Al Hokair Time. Now we will see Snowy Forest going into malls or even stand-alone under its own brand name, sometimes, but not always, as part of a major installation with Sparky's and SkyZone.

"But we are establishing Snowy Forest as a destination in its own right; with its own characteristics and all of the successful elements



Amer J Abouzour, Snowy Forest brand manager



Bouncing and climbing into new territories

SPREADING new ideas in trampoline parks - and taking them into Europe - is the task set for Leonard "Jamal" Tasico, the Sky Zone operations manager for Al Hokair and the head of partnership and development for the group.

The Sky Zone US-trained specialist has led the Al Hokair charge into the trampoline market over the past couple of years, seizing a market leadership position. "My task is to keep us there," said Tasico, "introducing new edutainment innovations to bring guests into our parks ahead of those of the competition."

There are already 15 Sky Zones in operation in the kingdom right now with another four or five to come up in 2019, either stand-alone projects or part of the Al Hokair Time projects that have become the talk of the region for their distinctive characteristics that separate, for the first time, entertainment and retail.

Perhaps the biggest new concept brought to the sector in the kingdom is Al Hokair's glow-in-the-dark adventure park, which will not only offer trampolines but also a Sky Ninja obstacle course among other attractions. Located at Al Hokair Time, King Salman, in Riyadh, the course is only the second of its type in the world, the other being in Las Vegas, US.

Provided by Mexican manufacturer IdeasX, the ninja warrior-style course stands 13ft high and offers varying skill levels for participants.

This style of location is a pilot for the group and will soon be rolled out in other regions later in the year, including Dammam and Al Khobar. The recent relaxing of rules governing the playing of live music has allowed venues such as Al Hokair Time to introduce in-house DJs providing a contemporary music background combined with laser light shows.

"The public love it," said Tasico, "at weekends it's totally full so we can accept advance bookings only. It's been a huge success."

Also coming in to all Sky Zone locations will be sessions for women, following a successful initial trial. "The reception by the public has been very enthusiastic," said Tasico. He added that there is a project to open a full-time, women-only



adventure park this year. The long-term plan is to build one female-only indoor adventure park for each region in the kingdom.

These initiatives have reinforced Al Hokair's dominant position within the Saudi Arabian trampoline park market, already standing at around 80 per cent market share. There are two or three small operators who are also active but Hokair holds a commanding advantage. "Every year we introduce new attractions to innovate and to stay ahead of the game," said Tasico. "The attractions that are removed to make way from older parks get moved around and placed into others to refresh their offerings."

Indoor parkour will feature heavily in 2019 with a premiere at Al Hokair Land in Riyadh, and Tasico is targeting at least five more in cities including Jeddah, Dammam and Al Khobar. Like the venue at King Salman, Riyadh, they will feature glow-in-the-dark designs with DJs in an attempt to capitalise on their new-found popularity.

Ploughing a similar furrow to the parkour facilities, other fitness attractions and programmes will run inside parks, including Zumba classes. "Health and wellbeing will be a focus," said Tasico. "Separate women's and men's



courses will be run and the women's will be on weekends too because now increasing numbers of women are working, so they can only attend at weekends. The Sky Zone, Extreme and Sky Ninja attractions are not only targeted at children but adults too, making them destinations for whole families. Our guests love it."

Another activity on the drawing board is indoor skydiving, although that is on hold as of now, with a reassessment due in the second quarter. If approved it should go ahead by Q3/Q4 2019.

The news from outside of the country is equally as interesting. Announcing last year that the company would expand its Sky Zone installations in Egypt by 10 locations and a similar number in Turkey, Tasico has illustrated the free-rein characteristic of his responsibilities for launching special brands.

This will take the company's name well into the international markets, opening with a new Extreme trampoline park in Zaragoza, Spain, soon. "This will provide a doorway into Europe," he said, "where the concept of adventure parks is in its infancy."

Staying in Spain, the sizeable new Malaga Resorts World project in 2021, he said, would include an Al Hokair-supplied and run Extreme park, with trampolines and ninja obstacles courses and other attractions.

Elsewhere in Europe, there are plans to work with Intu, the UK real estate investment trust, largely focused on shopping centre management and development. "The plan is that wherever they go, Al Hokair will go," Tasico said.



Building up food and beverage

EXPANSION into "own brand" food and beverage has been a theme in the past few months within the Al Hokair Group and will dominate the food and beverage sector this year, said

Dr Haitham H. Murad.

The group's amusement outlets - Sparky's, SkyZone, Snowy Forest - often contained within the stand-alone Al Hokair Time locations, now have a whole range of dining opportunities, but there is a drive within Murad's F and B department to attain higher levels of quality, even at the expense of profit.

"We want to ensure that we maintain a reputation for healthy options, diversity of product and high quality catering, even if it means lower profits," he said. He highlighted the importance of brand names within the Arab communities and emphasised how important it was now for quality in F and B.

"We looked long and hard at what was available in the industry. No matter how good a soft play centre or FEC is, if you cannot get a good cup of coffee there then everything becomes a negative feeling about the location. We long ago realised that we had to ensure that the right quality is in place. If the catering



facilities are of a high standard then families will stay longer on-site; they will play games longer, they will, in short, spend more money because they feel as though they are getting better value. F and B plays a very serious role in today's family entertainment centre; it is as important as the quality of the games and attractions."

It will be for not much longer that visitors to an Al Hokair location will eat or drink at a kiosk. The company is now installing "proper" food and drink opportunities where parents can relax and talk while children are enjoying the facilities, yet equally provide healthy and nutritious food and drinks for the children.

In comes Pezzo, the serve-by-slice pizzas under a franchise agreement with the brand owners in Singapore. Outlets are now appearing right across the Hokair estate. But there are also the "own brand" locations growing at a fast rate within the portfolio. La Mode is another growing name; launching initially within hotels, it is now spreading into the FECs.

"We have just opened our first La Mode Café, a full coffee house experience, at our FEC location in Khobar only in December," said Murad. "It is partnered in other locations by a La Mode Express, selling healthy foods, but also slushies, popcorn and ice cream to families." Khobar is a tourist area in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia on the coast.

The group is also rolling out Nachohot, an option that concentrates on natural foods and is already becoming popular. All of these new brands are opening first in Saudi, although a Nachohot outlet has opened already in Dubai.

"We have a policy of mixing franchise locations with our own brands. And then taking our own brands elsewhere. There is for example a La Mode Café opening shortly in Jordan. We expect to concentrate on hotel openings with this brand although there will be some going into family entertainment centres as well as in stand-alone locations."



Around 80 per cent of the F and B outlets that come under Murad's jurisdiction are of the own-brand variety. "We have now gained a great deal of experience in running food and beverage," he said. "We love to work with the big names, Starbucks, Baskin-Robbins, as they have the famous brands familiar to the Arab community, and we know that they can offer their own 'know-how,' but we have also developed our own skills."

Murad is proud that he has seen 22 outlets of the La Mode Café opening under his direction, all of them in hotels until the group branched out for the first time with a full-service café in Khobar, where there is also a Nachohot. They are the first to run alongside Sparky's, Snowy Forest and SkyZone. They are being carefully evaluated as the group expands its scope into other destinations.



Dr Haitham H. Murad



Change your mood and their mood



ALHOKAIR
TIME

ANOTHER
PLACE



الحكير تايم

ALHOKAIR TIME

مجموعة الحكير
al hokair group

التطوير العقاري
Real Estate Development



Regionally speaking

ADMINISTRATION and most of the corporate processes at the Al Hokair Group are carried out from its headquarters in Dammam, in the eastern part of the kingdom, but in such a vast country it is necessary to divide the responsibilities at management level to ensure levels of local control.

There are five regions: Central, Eastern, Medinah, Western and Southern and each has its own regional manager, responsible for all of the day-to-day operation of the venues within his geographical patch.

We spoke to three of Al Hokair's regional managers about their own region's progress and the changes that have taken place there in the past year.

Sultan Al Ayyash takes all of the local responsibility for the Medinah region. His region, he said, is typical in that it doesn't relate directly to any other. "All of the regions are different; they each offer separate challenges and individual issues. Mine, based in Medinah, has four locations each of which includes all three of the big brands, Sparky's, Snowy Forest and Sky Zone. We also have outdoor locations in Hail, Qassim, Yanbu and Tabuk."

Of these, one big new one, the Al Hokair Time at Qassim, opened in 2018. Has that brought new challenges? "For all the staff and the supervisors, this new opening was a considerable occasion, but we all have experience in the field. The biggest challenge of all is bringing new ideas to the business to generate more revenue."

At Central region, which includes the capital, Riyadh, Adeeb Albaz feels his main responsibility is to ensure that all aspects of company policy is the first consideration of his job and key to that is the maintenance of the highest standards of customer service, safety and cleanliness. "All in all, it is a case of making sure that there is a memorable guest experience."

He feels that Central region offers different challenges to the other four regions in that it is located in the capital and that is the hub of



the business community. It means, he said, that there is a different mix of visitors, including other nationalities and cultures.

Albazz has to manage 14 FECs, including all three principal brands, plus Extreme, with a staff of 533. The most popular attraction is Sparky's Panorama, very much the flagship FEC of the group, where many VIP families visit. "And now we have Al Hokair Time King Salman, where the new Sky Zone Glow is located with its glow-in-the-dark attractions."

He has seen two new venues open in the year, the Snowy Forest Thumama and the Sky Zone Glow, but soon will have the new Sky Zone in Riyadh - Takasusy that will have specific days of the week for females only.

His biggest challenge, said Albazz, is to maintain the title of "Best Park in the KSA." "This forces the holder to enhance their capabilities to live up to the qualification annually. What I want to do is maintain the same standards whole reducing the

cost base. That, of course, and contribute to the general aims of Vision 2030."

Over in Western region, manager Khalid Al Khelaiwi is based in Jeddah, strategically important as it is the entry point for many of the millions who visit Mecca each year.

"My objective is probably the same as my colleagues in the other regions," he said. "To operate efficiently, ensure the safety of visitors and provide a degree of service excellence that is the key element in the Al Hokair operation."

He said: "In addition to the proximity to Mecca, Jeddah is a destination in itself in that it is located on the Red Sea and has many tourist facilities, a corniche, beach, seashore and all of the other elements of a big, modern city, modern malls and a traditional market."

Khelaiwi has 11 locations in his region, served by 215 staff. Although there were no additional new locations during the past year, he is looking forward to a new Al Hokair Time opening soon.



Sultan Al Ayyash



Adeeb Albazz



Khalid Al Khelaiwi

Route one to success

FOR Donia Al Sharafi there is no question about the most important element in running an FEC - customer service.

That makes Al Sharafi, as head of that department, a significantly senior part of the management process.

"It is, without question, the most important element in running an FEC. Good customer service builds trust; people will only stay loyal if they have good reason to. You have to work even harder to keep customers and build their trust in your brand and by providing a good customer service you can improve the relationship between an FEC and its guests."

Added to that, she said, it could be concluded that customer service matters more than the price of play. "Consumers say that customer service is more important than price. To get the right experience guests will pay more, it is as simple as that."

It will also build brand awareness because word of mouth is the most powerful ally an operator can have. What customers say to others, she argued, could build or break a business. "When you provide the best in customer service people will recommend the venue to their friends, colleagues and families. They will remember your brand. If they hear someone else talking about a need for a good

FEC, they are much more likely to say 'go to Al Hokair - they're great'."

It will also reduce problems, which, Al Sharafi said, "can happen in any company." She said: "No matter how hard you try to avoid problems, they will happen. Your business cannot be perfect; you can ensure friction does not become an issue, however. If customers know that they can voice complaints and their views will be taken seriously and that faults will be rectified, then they will feel comfortable doing business with you. Keep these points in mind and enjoy the positive results."

Al Sharafi firmly believes that Al Hokair is dominant through its prominence in Saudi Arabia. "The biggest challenge for us is to challenge ourselves and reach more customers."

She is part of an intensive training programme, qualifying in customer service skills, personality recognition, team management and customer relationship management systems. "Actually, some of them are applied to all of the staff and there are special training courses for 'shop floor' staff."

Her department at Al Hokair is 100 per cent females, illustrating graphically Al Hokair's commitment to the Vision 2030 programme that calls for more women entering the labour market and giving priority to the development of women's talents and activating their participation



Donia Al Sharafi, head of customer service at Al Hokair's HQ

in the Saudi economy.

"I want to attract more women into the company generally and certainly into my sector."

Al Sharafi quotes the quality of the service as the first priority. Then the need to evaluate the nature of the customer they are dealing with and adjust responses to attain the highest level of positive reaction, choosing the right staff-members for each role, based upon experience, culture and knowledge in the field, then a positive response to enquiries.

"The need to respond to all queries posed by customers to the employees with answers that are comprehensive, complete and honest."

Customer relations, she said, are the cornerstone of the success of any company that relies entirely on customer satisfaction. "At Al Hokair we are keen to win customers' loyalty by providing the best, both in customer service and in credibility."

Setting standards for women

LONG experience in quality control at another company in Saudi Arabia, outside of the amusement and attractions industry, has given Hana Al Kassabi a keen awareness of the importance of quality in its staff.

Coupled with the new-found drive to bring Saudi women into the workforce, a move championed by Al Hokair, it has given extra emphasis to training at the company.

Now Al Kassabi has found that she has benefited from the empowerment of women in

the kingdom, becoming regional trainer for the company, ensuring that the staff meet the very high standards set by the group.

"As a regional trainer, I have to have an understanding of the types of personalities within our employees and bring them to the pitch where they meet the company's goals. That process has to be developed smoothly and must be synchronised with all of the targets set by our management. I have to remain totally proactive within this role but, after 14 years' experience outside of the industry in quality control, I know all about that."

The sheer size of Saudi Arabia does not appear to be daunting for Al Kassabi, but in her first 18 months in the job she has been to almost every corner of the kingdom. "In the first four to six months, I undertook 25 trips but I enjoyed visiting places I'd never seen before. It helped me to meet people from other parts of the country and to learn to appreciate that they have disparate characteristics and ways of doing things."

But, as a woman, does she not feel that some of her "students" going through her training procedures may feel resentful? "I have found

nothing like that. In fact, it is something new in our culture to have a female trainer for male trainees but everyone knows about the Vision 2030 initiative set by the government and they also know that part of that programme is the empowering of women in all fields. I have found a wonderful degree of acceptance of this principle and there has been great interaction between people - especially young people - to make this objective achievable."

Al Kassabi is keenly aware of the leadership initiatives taken by Al Hokair Group in bringing women into the workforce and playing its full part in the Vision 2030 programme, especially for the opportunity it has created for her. She said that the new intake of female employees had shown that they are just as capable of immediate take-up of new roles as their male counterparts.

"They display a thirst for learning and development. They like to meet people in their jobs. Employment helps to give them more confidence in themselves and helps them take responsibility and make decisions. I find them very responsive in the courses and they all have ambitions - usually to eventually take up roles in the senior management of the company!"



Hana Al Kassabi, regional trainer

ICE-Hokair, the dream team

AT *InterGame*, we can only think of one other person in the amusement industry with the depth of experience of the Middle East market to compare with Gene Brogowski - from among the many non-Middle East resident industry specialists, that is.

That makes Brogowski very knowledgeable indeed, and our own staff have at least twice bumped into the ICE director of international sales while on Middle East tours.

Brogowski first came into contact with Al Hokair during his very early sojourns into the region, 25 years ago. Since then, he has worked personally and directly with the company constantly. "In those early days I would meet with Majid Al Hokair in Riyadh at the old Rabwa brand with its little offices upstairs. We moved on from there to holding meeting at the plastics factory in the Industrial City, but these days I meet Mishal Al Hokair at the wonderful new offices in the shiny Business Park in Dammam.

"I cannot number the times we have met, but throughout all of that period one thing has remained constant: their full commitment to the industry and their passionate desire to offer something new and innovative and to be ahead of the pack."

Brogowski recalls that the very early meetings were mostly about the significance of operating redemption games - a very new concept at the time - and debates about the value of a large and inviting prize counter.

Later he worked with the company closely on ICE's special crane projects for the kingdom. "We needed to develop the Winner Every Time concept crane, where the player either wins a major plush prize or at the very least a small conciliatory prize, perhaps bulk candy. This version was in Arabic for the Al Hokair operations. We also customised our Grab 'n' Win line with Al Hokair's deputy general manager, Ahmed Ebid, who wanted the Sparky's concept with its firefly character built into the graphics."

Brogowski said that the Al Hokair passion for "being first" had led to many innovations coming into Saudi ahead of everywhere else and into Al Hokair locations ahead of the competition. "We worked with their team exclusively for the national roll-out of Angry Birds in the kingdom. It was presented across all of their stores in a large format of four units or two units with deluxe marquees, that they then marketed to the



Gene Brogowski (left) greets Majed Al Hokair at DEAL

customer base. These games were also 'localised' in language and for cultural sensitivities."

It was, he said, very much a two-way thing, with both companies equally driven to get the very maximum out of the products that they developed in partnership. This extended right the way through the Al Hokair infrastructure, notably to Fazlu Armar and his technical training classes in Riyadh for its operational and technical teams. "This sharing of information and the quest for education continues today."

Brogowski is a keen enthusiast for ICE's "Skill Wall," a special set-up of skill-based games that occupy an entire wall of a location. This has been a feature of the new Al Hokair Time stand-alone destination FECs that are now springing up across Saudi. "These carnival-style redemption games, such as Down the Clown, Bean Bag Toss, Milk Jug Toss and Gold Fishin', plus the sports games like NBA Basketball, are very attractive when presented together."

His president, Joe Coppola, has some considerable experience of the international markets himself, including the Middle East, and he sees the region - and Al Hokair - as fitting very importantly into the big picture. "Al Hokair has been an incredibly important customer in that region for many years. Gene recognised their commitment to redemption many years ago before redemption was even a huge concept globally. As we have grown over the past 25 years, so too has our relationship with Al Hokair.



A line-up of Angry Birds games at an Al Hokair location

"Gene very intelligently recognised the huge growth opportunity and the strength of the Middle East market right from those early days and as a result ICE has been a regular at DEAL every year. While many markets around the world tend to go through different cycles and ebb

and flow based upon many factors such as economy and politics, the Middle East has been without doubt one of the most consistent and we have enjoyed tremendous relationships with many operators there. Gene has worked hard at forging those relationships so that when the people there buy from ICE they know that the sales is just the beginning and that we will support that product for years to come."

They both echo the view that throughout that 25 years there has been an undercurrent of market leadership that has come from Al Hokair and its passion for excellence.



A technical seminar on ICE products at Al Hokair



A customised ICE crane with Sparky's marquee

HR reaching for the next level

THE key element in the year for Feras Alhamoud's human resources department in 2018 - and certainly it will dominate 2019 - has been the empowerment of Saudi women.

Across the country changes in fundamental Saudi society have seen opportunities open up for its women - and Al Hokair mirrors those changes.

"It has been without doubt the most important element of the year for Al Hokair in 2018," said the Alhamoud. "Our society has opened up in several ways, but the new involvement of women in everyday life has been the stand-out impact and it has brought distinct advantages for us at Al Hokair.

"One of the major changes has been the government's initiatives on wider opportunities for entertainment. The kids we serve - and their families - are in the main easy-going people and they need to feel that everything around them is friendly. This new way of thinking has opened up all kinds of opportunities for us."

"Saudi females have proved that they are bringing something that we lacked before in our working environment. Many women have proved that they are eager to take up jobs; some of them have already moved on to the next stage. We have given them the chance and they have proved themselves."

Having more women in the business, said Alhamoud, brings benefits. "Saudi females have proved that they are bringing something that we lacked before in our working environment. Many women have proved that they are eager to take up jobs; some of them have already moved on to the next stage. We have given them the chance and they have proved themselves."

Women have taken up many of the opportunities to reach supervisory level within the Al Hokair Group. They have also become managers and team leaders. "In the case of Snowy Forest, for example, as it is a soft play area for very young children, their natural abilities as females come to the fore. Now most of our Snowy locations are managed by women, and very successfully too."

He added: "They know how to deal with kids; it comes naturally to them. It isn't just a new-found ability to drive in Saudi, those women are proving that they are perfectly capable of holding down very responsible jobs. The fact that they can now drive means that they will also be arriving for work on time!"

The first benefits of the new initiatives in Saudi are now being felt throughout the entertainment industry, in concert with Saudi society in general, he said. "The impact will continue to be felt on an increasing scale as the year progresses,

bringing advantages to all forms of work within the kingdom.

"In two or three years it will become very apparent that this was a well-judged change in our society. At Al Hokair we are at the forefront of Saudi companies in terms of forward-thinking initiatives and we will utilise any opportunities like this to improve our business, especially as it contributes so strongly to our local communities at the same time."

The visionary attitudes at Al Hokair to every aspect of its business have, said Alhamoud, surprised everyone outside of the company, notably its competitors. "We know that they visit our locations to look at how we do things and I know that they are surprised at the multi-national policies that they see among our workforce - and now too, the degree of authority that we have given to our female workforce."

He said that the company has 30-plus nationalities working for it. "This is somewhat unusual - even for Saudi companies."

Overall, he said, everyday life in Saudi Arabia was changing - and changing for the better. With it, customer expectation was also growing. As a service company, Al Hokair Group has to become more efficient in order to meet those expectations. It is a challenge, Alhamoud said. The company is a leader in its field in its home market and therefore sets the standards. At the same time it was being challenged by companies

coming into the FEC industry from outside of Saudi Arabia - good companies with strong reputations and they represent a major threat that Al Hokair was moving rapidly to counter.

"When you have a high customer expectation and new-found strong competition all happening at the same time, it throws up major challenges for us. We must still rise to the quality assurance that is expected of us, utilising the very latest thinking in hospitality, constantly self-critical and monitoring our own performance. That is the only way that we can meet the challenges being presented."

This will present Al Hokair with its main goals for the year ahead. It was laid out for every department during the group's annual meeting of all of its middle and senior management in December. Everyone, he said, was well aware of the tough year that is to come, but were equally confident that they would be able to achieve their own goals.

"We enjoy these challenges. We are keeping our employees close to us, nurturing their talents and taking care of them. Our colleagues in the training department have new processes to bring out the talents of the people that we recruit.

"We are not worried about the competition; it is for them to worry about how to wrest our dominant position from us. We are ready to reach for the next level."



Feras Alhamoud, director of HR

Emphasis on quality

THERE'S a host of departments that could lay claim to be the most important within an organisation, but surely there's nothing more important to a company than quality?

Mohamed Hanbali, director of quality management, provided an update on just what is currently keeping his department busy.

"Since last year we've implemented new standards across the board. We're constantly evolving and adding new themes. We raised the bar in our targets for staff performance to 85 per cent and any that fall under that are the subject of a review.

"We're developing our staff in other ways too. More Saudi staff are coming out of our Sparky's academy in Jazan and we're training them to be the future leaders of our entertainment parks. Twenty came in last month; they've had their quality training and they have been allocated to various locations."

The higher benchmarks and focus on customer service will go forward in to 2019. As will efficiency savings, reducing unnecessary costs where possible. One major consideration in Saudi Arabia is maintaining stable air conditioning levels. A temperature between 24C and 26C in all locations can make huge savings on electricity costs.

With the liberalisation of Saudi society and the greater array of entertainment and leisure options, it is more important than ever for the Al Hokair group to not only maintain its quality standards but also to improve, said Hanbali.

"Guests at our locations now have more options and they will choose to go to those that offer the highest quality offerings and the best customer service.

"You can have an excellent park, great lighting, clean, bright, modern rides, but if there is no soul, no human touch with the customer then you will lose them.

"With this in mind, we now have a new mystery shopper programme in which the participants are given a questionnaire on several aspects, such as welcomes, awareness of pricing and offers, etc. This will come in later this year. We've had a pilot in a couple of locations in 2018, but 2019 will see the programme's full launch, starting with the 'A' locations - our big parks."

With entertainment becoming a more familiar concept to Saudis now, staff need to be trained fully in the standards Al Hokair expects, which is something Hanbali believes will make Al Hokair stronger for years to come.

"Very few companies in the kingdom have such programmes for staff and it is something



Mohamed Hanbali, director of quality management

we feel is vital to ensure continuing quality excellence and is also a source of great pride for us.

"It is very important to continue on our quest for quality in all areas of our operations, even when the economy is not at its best, if our standards remain high, then that will keep us growing and increasing revenue despite whatever external factors may be at work.

"Many of our new locations have attained the required standards in their first 12 months of operation and we're particularly pleased with this. It shows us that all our efforts have been effective and our methods just work."

Constantly evolving

LIKE most channels within Al Hokair, staying on top of technological evolution is crucial, but perhaps none more so than for the IT department.

Al Hokair has a customer relationship management initiative called Tistahel that was launched in 2018 and it is something that IT developed from the ground up. Despite having turned it over to the marketing department for operation, IT is still responsible for its updates.

"We are still involved with the Tistahel loyalty programme, as we are committed to lots of new development," said IT manager, Tareq Khalaf. "We are constantly upgrading the programme and have enabled new controls that minimise security risks and secure more accurate data.

"We also launched our new Sparky's Store app that is linked with Tistahel. This allows our customers to purchase and redeem their points online."

There were other challenges to face in 2018 on top of the CRM duties and preparing for the introduction of VAT. "Our biggest challenge was the staff turnover as most of the IT employees move on after a short period. This obviously impacts on the department as it takes much effort to train new staff, guide them through our business and get them familiar with our systems,

only for them to then leave us.

"Our other ongoing focus is maintaining of our security procedures. 2018 was a high-risk year that saw many attacks on IT systems in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia in particular. We had to increase restrictions to their highest levels for some time and apply as many sessions as possible to deny attacks."

Keeping on top of such critical projects requires the department to run smoothly observing high standards, so 2017's service efficiency of over 80 per cent was an important factor in achieving this. "Our service efficiency reached its highest peak ever in 2018," revealed Khalaf. "We were able to boast a zero-problem record during the last 12 months, which we are so proud of."

FEC customers are increasingly looking for e-commerce options when booking parties and buying credit for swipe cards, for example. Al Hokair is launching a new service called Tap and Go that allows customers to pay easily at its locations using a mobile app while play cards will also be able to be topped up online. Other initiatives that the IT department is working on include self-service kiosks, online reservations, free in-store wi-fi and online customer satisfaction surveys.

2019's drive will be towards making the customer journey as smooth as possible using IT. In a marketplace that is now crowded, ensuring people return to Al Hokair locations is key. Providing them outlets for interaction through the app, website, call centre and self-service kiosks is vital to achieving this.



Tareq Khalaf, IT manager

Stepping up the training process

It isn't enough to have your own training academy, this year Mohammed Joudallah has taken the process a stage further.

The training and career development manager at Al Hokair Group, Joudallah has to ensure that the thousands of staff at the company's 90-plus locations are not just fully competent but able to enhance the overall product to guests.

His team, based at the group's headquarters in Dammam, has joined in a government initiative to train prospective middle management over a two-year period.

"Big multi-national companies like Pepsi have their own training academies," he said, "in which they can put trainees through a proper induction process with the longer-term objective of improving the quality of their business. We are the same; we are constantly working on our training process and it is gradually evolving.

"We have a pilot scheme this year focusing more on sales, improving the skills of middle management such as IT and finance planning or more technical training. We have leadership training for existing staff and try to help them to coach their own staff. We don't outsource our training too much, but this new initiative with the Saudi government is a major innovation this year."

Al Hokair has contracted with the government for a 24-month initiation project with new students under which the trainees are 20 months under government instruction - part-paid by Al Hokair - and then spend the last four months having their general business skills honed to tune-in to the specific requirements of the Al Hokair Group.

"They come to our locations for hands-on intensive tuition. We have 50 of them currently going through the process, including 20 from Al Baha in the south-west of Saudi and 20 from Jazan, which is on the coast. They have undergone an initial course in hotel management and then moved on to our locations.

"We want this year to focus on individuals, taking each one on their own and working on the areas of their skills that need to be improved. We bring them all to our Eastern region where our head office is, for intensive training for a month. This begins with the background and structure of the group and instruction on the general entertainment industry. They then learn about every aspect of the business, from leasing to running parties, in three-hour sessions. Then we take them through purchasing and maintenance - we go through every department in a typical Al Hokair location.

"Each procedure is gone through in detail and then they go to the separate locations to look at the daily routines. Getting involved in the day-to-day hands-on work is next."

Joudallah feels strongly that this new-style approach will result in a higher proportion of the intake actually attaining the standards that Al Hokair seeks in new recruits. "We are watching

the new batch from Jazan, for example, to measure their leadership qualities and see how they practice their skills."

Each of the students has to send the regional manager a weekly report on their own observations and experiences. "This gives them more focus - and we also have reports coming in from the regional managers themselves on how the students are progressing from their perspective. It all helps us to build a picture, focus on weaknesses and react positively to guide and correct."

In their reports Joudallah is looking for observations on the locations, how many rides, how many games, evaluating downtime, even where the fire extinguishers are positioned. "I want them to tell me what they think is the best game or the best ride and why they think the kids like those particular devices. This means that they also have to understand the sales report and ask questions if there is something on which they are not clear."

If all of this process is satisfactorily concluded then the trainee is offered a contract with Al Hokair.

All Saudi companies - certainly the big ones - have to take part in this government initiative, designed to reduce reliance on imported skills and build a skilled workforce of the country's own citizens.

It turns out people of supervisor standard for Al Hokair, but the training department applies its practices right across the board of the group's workforce, from the most basic jobs right up to the most senior positions. The group has five regions in its Saudi operation, Eastern, Riyadh, Medina, Northern and Jeddah, each with its own manager. Together the plan is to

adhere to the Saudi government's *Taqat* system - which means "powers" - that was introduced in 2016 and is designed to ensure that all jobs are first offered to Saudi citizens, giving a points-system to employers who score high in employing nationals.

The new supervisor training initiative fits with this project. "Before it was all done on a random basis," said Joudallah. "Now, it is clearly defined; we know exactly what the criteria are."

By late February, Al Hokair was hoping to have the first graduates from the supervisor scheme entering service with the company, which will be the source of considerable satisfaction for Joudallah and his small team.

"At the end of it all, we want people who are able to interact properly and positively with our guests. We now have competition coming into Saudi from high quality operators from other countries. We know that we must be constantly on top of our game to compete with these companies. We have competitors for our SkyZone trampoline parks; we have competition for our Sparky's amusement centres. These people will take some of our customers and it is our task to ensure that our own act is finely-tuned to combat that."

"At the end of it all, we want people who are able to interact properly and positively with our guests. We now have competition coming into Saudi from high quality operators from other countries. We know that we must be constantly on top of our game to compete with these companies."



A group of trainees with Joudallah, successfully completing their course

The name on the contract...

THE rides and games - and the spare parts for them - going into over 90 Al Hokair locations across Saudi Arabia and in the neighbouring countries where there are Al Hokair venues, Egypt and the UAE, are the ultimate responsibility of Syed Nazar, the purchasing manager.

A familiar figure at international trade shows, Nazar is a long-time senior executive at the company and it is he who puts the finishing touches to any deal concluded by the Al Hokair team at those shows.

"We don't always buy our equipment at exhibitions," he said. "We know many of our suppliers very well and often buy directly or have equipment specially made for us, but it is probably true that around 60 per cent of rides and games that go into our locations are part of deals that begin with discussions at shows."

A substantial Al Hokair team goes to IAAPA, for example. "That's the main event for us; that's where we see what's on the market."

But they don't go with any fixed idea on what they are going to buy. The team selects the products, but the sourcing and pricing is done separately and Nazar and his department, working closely with the finance department, place the order.

"There are always 20 or 30 containers on the seas destined for Al Hokair at any one time," he said. "I need to keep constant track of them. Each year we might spend 60 per cent of our budget on rides and parts and 40 per cent on games, but in another year it may be closer to 50-50."

Most of the purchasing, he said, is via distributors. "We have two main distributors in the Middle East, ASI and Warehouse of Games. We will buy through both of them; it makes sense to work through distributors because you then get local support. But there are some products that you have to buy directly because they sell directly.



"A case in point is ICE of the US. Their Gene Brogowski is a familiar visitor to our offices in Dammam and we will place orders directly with him." In fact, Brogowski was in the Al Hokair building in Dammam at the same time as InterGame visited... and he was due to move on to Kuwait and the UAE the next day.

"Wherever the best games are, we will buy them there. It is as simple as that," said Nazar. But the work doesn't stop with that.

Having pinpointed what is to be bought and fixed on price and delivery, Nazar has to ensure that there is the necessary paperwork, including certification of the product to enter the country; and then see it through to the natural conclusion of delivery to the right location. "We tend to organise clearance of the delivered product via an agent," he said.

Styles and tastes do not change substantially among guests using the big mechanical rides, he said, but it was a different story with games. "There is a rapidly changing attitude towards games by the players. Technology moves fast in the wider world and it is equally evident in games. The kids are close to their technology and are very discerning; they want to see the same levels of innovation with the games in FECs as they have on their hand-held devices.

"Entertainment is suddenly booming in the kingdom and it is our job to ensure that the rides and games on offer in our location are what is required by these new demands."

"Our technical team must know so much more in these days of networking with PC games that seem to have an inbuilt obsolescence both in terms of their robust construction and in terms of their game appeal."

The opening of the Saudi market to fresh and more liberal attitudes offers new challenges to Al Hokair, said Nazar. "There is going to be more competition for us, but that should be welcomed and we will react positively to it, as we always do to any fresh challenge. Entertainment is suddenly booming in the kingdom and it is our job to ensure that the rides and games on offer in our location are what is required by these new demands.

"My hope for 2019 is to see innovative new products coming into the group. Fresh technologies, fresh thinking from our main partners, companies like IE Park, SBF, Gosetto and from the games makers."



Aiming for a zero rating

ENSURING that staff react correctly in an emergency is a basic requirement of every family entertainment centre, but when you have responsibility for over 90 of them, it is a formidable task.

Mahmoud Ali Abo Elmkarem is the safety manager at the Al Hokair Group and it is only when you talk with him that the infinite number of safety considerations become apparent.

"The first job of a location manager every day is to tour the building with his supervisors and check for hazards," he said. "In this part of the world, everyday hazards are very different from anywhere else. When you have such high temperatures outside it brings different problems. We have to ensure that nothing is left out anywhere that could pose a hazard."

Safety on the rides is an obvious factor and there are very stringent procedures in place for the Al Hokair Group's rides maintenance people to go through every day. Those procedures have been in place for years and the group has an excellent safety record for its capital equipment.

It doesn't stop there, however, for Elmkarem and his small team. "I spend a lot of time travelling," he said, "between our locations talking to the people, the location managers, the regional managers, the staff at every level down to the cleaners. Yesterday, I was at our Khobar location where we held a safety seminar for all of the staff, but tomorrow it could be somewhere



With locations as busy as Al Hokair's, safety is a top priority

else in Saudi - and Saudi is a very big country."

Now five years with the company and two years in the managerial role in the safety department, Elmkarem has been able to institute some ideas of his own in terms of safety measures. "Take the IT department, for example, we have to take care of the computers and the servers. Much of the material in that equipment is expensive and does not react well to water, so there are no sprinklers in there. I devised my own set of safety rules for the staff to follow in that area of our premises."

But at the most basic level there is a whole stream of considerations. Every member of staff has to know where the fire extinguishers are in every venue - and how to operate them. They also have to ensure that those extinguishers are accessible - that there is nothing stacked in front of them. The same considerations relate to the emergency exits. "We run regular exercises with our staff to ensure that they know exactly what the procedures are in any kind of emergency."

"We work closely with the HR staff on this element and also with the training people - human resources, training and safety are a natural progression."

Elmkarem is also involved in the design of a new venue, ensuring that local fire and emergency considerations are included in designs and talking with local civil defence organisations to make certain that any requirements that they may have are built in.

With as many as five million guests visiting Al Hokair locations every year, their safety is of paramount importance, but also that of the staff themselves. "Once they have followed the correct procedures in any emergency, the staff are told to get out of the premises as fast as possible - we are not looking for heroes!"

It is almost impossible for 90-plus venues and five million guests to equate to zero incidents but Elmkarem and his safety team work very hard to ensure that every measure is put into place to keep serious incidents down to a minimum; a year of zero emergencies is a lot to hope for but it is an aspiration that is experienced often in an Al Hokair year, which much come as great satisfaction for the safety team.

As Elmkarem said: "All of those five million people have to feel secure when they enter our doors. Without that we won't get them back, so we are acutely aware of our responsibilities."



The landlord's perspective

NINETY-plus locations across three countries is a mighty holding in real estate.

All of that has to be managed and it comes down to the desk of Abdul Rahman Al Eissa, general manager retail and real estate at Al Hokair's headquarters in Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

Al Eissa has to oversee what goes into the retail units at every Al Hokair-owned property and currently estimates that 93 per cent of the available retail space has tenants.

Reeling them off, he said: "Rabwa is fully tenanted, Khobar is fully tenanted, King Salman is fully tenanted..." all of the big new names of the fresh venues opened by the group not only in Saudi but in the UAE and Egypt too. The Al Hokair Time stand-alone venues are in the highest demand, he confirmed. He has tenants with major domestic names in the kingdom but also many with international brands, such as Starbucks, Domino's, Baskin-Robbins and McDonald's.

And every year there are fresh openings to



work on. "We are opening two or three locations in Riyadh, Khobar, and we are looking for fresh sites or two or three more new venues in Jeddah as a priority for this year. We have just signed a contract on land at Al Hasa; they all fall under my remit."

Once built, Al Eissa has to negotiate with the potential tenants. "They are mostly food and beverage providers," he said, "and sometimes they will include one or two of our own food and beverage brands such as La Mode. Occasionally, we will allow some non-F and B tenants, but never more than one of a type. We would not, for example, have two perfume retail outlets in the same location." Toys 'R' Us is a familiar brand in the retail side of the Al Hokair locations, but he would never permit another toy retailer to join the same location.

He said that there was a marked difference between the style of location. "We can have retail units within mall-type venues at which our

entertainment brands provide anchors, but there are also what is effectively the strip mall. An interior venue, for example, may close at 10pm, but a unit which accesses directly outside may stay open until one or two in the morning."

All of these factors have to be taken into account by Al Eissa and his team at retail and real estate, even "in-house" tenancies. "Effectively, Al Hokair brands may be 'tenants,' because they emanate from another department within the group."

The ambitions of the group and its ever-changing - usually upwardly - attitudes towards expansion sees its established venues expanding laterally and fresh brands appearing, all of which have to go through the processes within the retail and real estates department under Al Eissa's control.

"We are working hard on fresh ideas for Al Hokair Time. I know it is a relatively new brand and we are still rolling it out in various parts

of the country, but even while that is going on there are talks about expanding the offer and that brings us into the negotiations." He said that some significant new expansions to the AHT concept were on the way.

Much of the available retail space was food and beverage because it dovetailed neatly with entertainment. And a surprising amount of it is outside. "While we have some very high temperatures here," said Eissa, "you must remember that for half of the year, say between October and April, it is very tolerable and people like to sit outside, so in much of our real estate there are outdoor catering facilities, only moving inside when the heat becomes too much."

It was all part of a picture of the Al Hokair Group infrastructure that is rarely considered, yet is vital to the overall foundations of the business - and growing as the group itself grows.

Meeting expectations

MUCH has been written in this supplement about Al Hokair's commitment to its customers, both external and internal, and this is part of the bedrock upon which any successful company stands.

The vital importance of these factors was among those that were addressed at the recent annual meeting of the Al Hokair Group for Tourism and Development's Entertainment Division.

The meeting showcased the most important themes of the division and its work within the amusement and attractions industry in the kingdom. These core values of customer, loyalty, quality, safety and development were apparent throughout the discussions, which concentrated on the main achievements of the channel during 2018, exchanges of insight, ideas, interactive debates, presentations and the vision for 2019.

The meeting was held in the presence of the executive vice president of the entertainment division, Mishal Al Hokair, and all the other relevant senior managers at the Holiday Inn Half Moon Bay in Al Khobar, not far from Hokair's Dammam HQ.

It got under way with Mishal Al Hokair expressing his thanks and appreciation to all attendees for their efforts during the past year in developing the company and supporting its goals, which are committed to providing a wonderful experience for its guests, enhancing efficient communication with employees to keep them informed of their expectations and direction, to listen to staff feedback on performance quality and raise the efficiency of productivity.

It wasn't only Al Hokair staff that were present at the meeting. Also in attendance were a number of decision makers and professionals from the wider amusement, entertainment and



Andre Van der Byl, Ahmed Ebid, Sultan Ayyash and executive vice president of the entertainment division, Mishal Al Hokair, with one of the Al Hokair awards

mall industries. They too were able to enjoy the concluding awards ceremony held to recognise the achievements of many of Al Hokair's best performers and those most committed to excellence.

The categories and winners were: Best Entertainment Site: Financial performance - Sparky's, Al Salam Mall of Riyadh; Best

Entertainment Site: Most developed in quality - Sparky's Dawadmi; Best Entertainment Site: Most developed in quality results - Sparky's Panorama Mall Riyadh; Best Entertainment Site Manager: Mazen Rajab; Best Employee Award: Ideal employee - Noor Asiri, Sparky's Red Sea Mall, Jeddah; and Best Management Award - Quality Management Team.





RIYADH

- AL HOKAIR TIME RABWA
- AL MAKAN MALL
- AL HOKAIR TIME KING SALMAN ROAD

AL KHOBAR

- AL HOKAIR TIME QURTOBA
- AL HOKAIR TIME AZIZIA

JEDDAH

- AZIZ MALL
- ROSHAN MALL

DAMMAN

- AL HOKAIR TIME BEACH

TAIF

- AL HOKAIR TIME

MADINAH

- AL HOKAIR TIME

MAKKAH

- AL HOKAIR TIME

JAZAN

- AL HOKAIR TIME

The ethos of a famous name

WHEN you have a population of 34 million, of which around 40 per cent are below the age of 25, then communicating with them adequately will make all the difference for a family entertainment centre operator.

In the case of Al Hokair, the hot seat is currently occupied by a Saudi (often many middle management roles in Saudi society are taken by foreign nationals, but that is now rapidly changing). He is Khalid Al Khan, who is PR and communications manager for the group.

Al Khan is passionate about the message that he wants to get across to the world - it is a message already well known by most Saudis: when one speaks about entertainment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it is a term concurrent with Al Hokair. "You don't say that you are going out to an FEC; you say you are going to Al Hokair - even if your destination is one of our rivals!"

He is equally passionate about the real reason for that kind of acceptance in his country. "Many of our smaller towns and cities would not have family entertainment centres if it were not for the founder of our company, Sheikh Abdulmohsin Al Hokair. He decided many years ago that he had a social responsibility to bring entertainment to the masses within the kingdom.

"He was not concerned about the demographics of a town or city; whether it would necessarily yield the kind of revenues that a group such as ours would need. Al Hokair Group was operating very successfully and profitably in the really big cities, so he was able to bring entertainment to the smaller places.

"Let us be plain about this - many of our competitors now coming into Saudi would not entertain opening in some of the places that we have our Sparky's or other entertainment brands operating. The profits simply would not be there for them. But our founder had a longer vision and it was a vision that he passed on to his sons, who now follow the same path."

Al Khan is a considerable advocate of the ethos laid down by the founder many years ago, but equally he is not concerned at the influx of



Khalid Al Khan, PR and communications manager

non-Saudi operators into the country currently, with the Vision 2030 programme now in full force and its accent on entertainment. "We have been in Saudi longer than anyone. We have the experience and the reputation and we have the know-how and under Mishal Al Hokair, we have the kind of leadership that will enable Al Hokair to grow both inside the country and elsewhere."

Al Khan leads a team that is dedicated to getting the word out to the kids in Saudi Arabia, not to tell them what Al Hokair is - that task is already accomplished - but to inform them what offers, promotions and special deals are available in Hokair locations that month.

He does not do that by newspapers, television or radio but principally through social media because that is so much more effective with the technological tastes of today's youngsters. "We market our company to the kids. They bring the rest of the family and we ensure that we keep to our basic plan - everyone leaves with a smile."

While the Al Hokair Group promotes its activities through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, it is the latter two that Al Khan says

offers the best results. "Instagram is now a basic in our culture. It is how the kids communicate so we use it to communicate with them, telling them what campaigns we are running.

"The best each year seems to be one of our customer service programmes, Ya Halla ("hello" in Arabic), but there are many that are identified in advance by the communications team and tagged with special offers, campaigns and promotions. Another good one is run a week after the kids have gone back to school after the three-month summer holidays. The first weekend after they go back is a very popular date for promotions."

Parties, groups and contact with the customer service hotline all combine with social media as a constant drip-feed of ideas and incentives as Al Khan and his team get to work each year to make the Al Hokair operation even more streamlined and attractive to families.

In 2019, there will be a new tie-up with Spacetoon, a major Saudi television channel and holder of a number of franchises of international note, including the Smurfs, Transformers and My Little Pony. In December a promotional campaign was run in conjunction with Spacetoon that saw characters representing those famous children's programmes visiting a series of Al Hokair locations with live shows.

"We need to be first with everything and then work that innovation very strongly through the communication channels we have set up," he said. "Not quite first, but nearly. The Sky Zone venue in Riyadh was the second in the world to have a glow-in-the-dark infrastructure (the first was in Las Vegas), but it illustrates my point.

"It is vital that we are very committed and passionate about what we do and project it strongly through mass communications. So far it has worked well. For 2019, we will have fresh challenges, not the least of which the opening of the chain of cinemas across the country and the impact of fresh competition but that is something upon which we thrive."



Khalid Qutob, one of Al Hokair's marketing specialists for the west region, is also responsible for event management and kid's activities

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